

Associated Press finds bodies of those kidnapped by France/U.S./Canada-allied Mali military

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Introduction by Roger Annis, Jan. 11, 2014

Last August, Mali held its first election since the military coup of March 2012 that overthrew its elected government.

The coup was followed by an invasion by France, in January 2013. Hundreds were killed in northern Mali by the foreign invaders and the Malian military.

Today, Mali hosts a large UN Security Council military occupation mission (known by its acronym MINUSMA) and a separate, French military strike force. There are 2,500 French soldiers operating in the north of the country. MINUSMA consists of app. 5,400 soldiers and 950 police drawn from some 35 countries, including Canada and Britain.

Some of progressive Malian society supported the coup. An even larger section supported the French military intervention.

This enclosed article reports on the kidnappings, torture and murders of Malians of Arab and Tuareg (Tamasheq) origin in the north of the country that have continued under the foreign occupation regime. It's a familiar story in the country—each time there have been uprisings in the north of the country by the national minorities who live there over social and political grievances, political and military setbacks are followed by reprisals by Mali's military. In these latest cases, the reprisals are taking place under the noses of the foreign occupiers.

In late November, the army colonel who led the March 2012 coup, Amadou Sanogo, was arrested. He is charged with kidnappings and other rights violations of members of Mali's military who opposed his coup. You can read reports on his arrest [here](#) and [here](#).

Mali's new government is also threatening charges of "high treason" against the former president who was ousted in the coup, Amadou Toumani Toure. His efforts to find compromise with political forces in the north of the country were always opposed by Mali's military and sections of civil society. Toure now lives in Senegal.

Tensions remain high in northern Mali. In late November, Malian soldiers fired upon a pro-independence protest of women, killing one and injuring others. The protest was in response to an attempt by Malian President Oumar Tatam Ly to visit the city. Pro-independence sentiment among the Tuareg people remains high and Kidal is the largest city of Tuareg population in Mali.

In December, French soldiers killed 19 people in an operation in and around Timbuktu.

Serious political divisions have opened up in the Tuareg liberation organization MNLA following the French military intervention. A section of the movement's leadership opted to cooperate with the

intervention which was aimed, in the first place, at killing and otherwise destroying rightist, Islamist forces that had moved into northern Mali following the coup and pushed aside MNLA-led forces.

The following Associated Press report was published in Postmedia's *Vancouver Sun* five weeks later after it was first published by AP. The independent Tuareg news agency Toumast Press carries ongoing news of northern Mali (in French). You can read my reporting on Mali over the past two years on my website page [\[1\]](#).

Roger Annis

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AP reporter's quest in Mali to find bodies ends in desert

By Rukmini Callimachi, published on *The Big Story* (Associated Press), Dec. 8, 2013

TIMBUKTU, Mali— Across the desert, the wind combs the sand into smooth ripples that roll out evenly for miles. So when a hole is dug, you see it immediately. The sand looks agitated. Its pattern is disturbed.

That's how you know where the bodies are buried.

Close to three dozen people in northern Mali disappeared earlier this year, killed or taken away by the country's military, according to human rights groups. The victims were caught in a backlash against Arabs and Tuaregs, desert people who form a small and shrinking ethnic minority in Mali. As the West Africa bureau chief for The Associated Press, I wanted to know what had happened to them.

Over six months, my colleagues and I tracked down what we would rather not have found: Six bodies in the desert, including that of a 70-year-old grandfather who had become a symbol of the killings. In each case, the victims had last been seen taken away by the Malian military at gunpoint. And in at least four of the cases, the military was found responsible in an internal report described to me but never released to the public.

The bodies offer concrete evidence for killings that Mali's government has so far denied in public. If the government acknowledges their deaths, it could open a path to bring those who killed the men to justice. It also finally could return the bodies to their bereft families, who did not know where their loved ones were buried, or were too terrified to recover them.

Mali's government, which has been promised \$4.2 billion in aid from the international community, has refused to comment. The military reacted angrily.

"You have no proof. Show me the proof!" Col. Diarran Kone, spokesman for Mali's ministry of defense, told the AP last week. After hearing that the AP investigation had located six of the bodies, he added: "We have nothing more to say about this."

We found the first body almost by accident, after our car got stuck in the sand.

I was in Timbuktu to report on the end of an al-Qaida-led occupation, which among other things had rubbed salt into racial wounds.

During their 10-month-long rule, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb had driven out the Malian army and terrorized this city. Its Arabic-speaking fighters created racial division by giving key posts to the city's Arabs and Tuaregs, who shared their history of marginalization, as well as their light skin tone. These traditionally nomadic people make up less than 10 percent of Mali's population of 15.9 million, the majority of whom are black.

When France finally sent troops into its former colony to drive out the extremists in January, the city was in ecstasy. Women tore off their veils. People who had not heard music for close to a year danced in the streets, holding up cellphones as improvised boom boxes.

But the bitterness of the invasion lingered. And when the army came back, it was looking to settle scores. In some cases, those who happened to share the same skin color as the extremists paid with their lives.

A week after my arrival at the end of January, we began hearing rumors of bodies dumped in the desert. My colleague Baba Ahmed, AP's correspondent in Mali, drove north to the dunes, where his car got mired in the sand.

The children who came to help push it out pointed him to the spot where a middle-aged man's white robe stuck out of the ground. He'd been dumped less than a mile outside the city, a few hundred yards from a soccer field.

By the time I got there, the people living nearby seemed to know everything about the man lying beneath just one foot of sand, starting with his ethnicity: "L'Arabe," they said. Arab.

The man, Mohamed Lamine, turned out to be the headmaster of a local Quranic school. We found his frightened wife, who confirmed that she had seen her husband loaded into the back of a military truck at gunpoint.

She agreed to come to the grave in the dark, before dawn, with her parents. When she recognized her husband's robe, Ani Bokar Arby screamed out. Next to his head lay a spent bullet.

Just a few yards away, we found the body of another Arab man, Mohamed Tidiane, a carpet seller taken the same day and identified by Lamine's family.

These first two bodies taught us where and how to look: Drive north to a concrete cement flame built, ironically, as a memorial to peace. Then scan the undulating surface, until the sand gives itself away.

Since January, Human Rights Watch has reported 24 killings of civilians by the Malian military, 11 disappearances, and more than 50 cases of abuse. Victims said they were beaten, electrocuted, waterboarded and injected with an acid-like substance. Amnesty International released similar findings last week, citing 24 killings and 11 disappearances, although it's unclear if they were the same ones.

Tens of thousands of Arabs and Tuaregs fled to neighboring countries, leaving behind a maze of boarded-up houses and the concrete shells of looted businesses. Only a handful stayed in Timbuktu.

It was around this time that I heard about Ali Ould Kabbad, the Arab grandfather also known to his family and friends simply as "Vieux Ali" or "Old Ali."

Despite owning several hundred head of cattle, Vieux Ali lived simply, wearing the same plastic sandals so often that the band over his left toe had given out.

His children begged him to leave, I later learned from them. But he wouldn't hear of it. He shook his Malian identity card in their faces.

After all, he had already lived through three military crackdowns on Arabs and Tuaregs, who are locked into an unhappy marriage with the country's black majority because of land borders dating back to French colonial rule. Every time Tuareg separatists rebelled, the military responded with blunt force, killing both rebels and light-skinned civilians who looked like them.

Vieux Ali, a descendant of one of Timbuktu's oldest Arab families, proudly pointed out that the graves of his ancestors lay just feet from the 400-year-old tomb of Sidi Mahmoud, the city's patron saint. It was proof, he said, that his ancestors had lived in Timbuktu since at least the 1500s.

Why should he flee his own country, he asked, where he and his father and his grandfather were born? Hadn't his black neighbors said they would vouch for him?

He took the precaution of presenting soldiers at the Malian military camp with a bull. He said it was a gift for liberating the city, though privately his family acknowledged it was an attempt to buy his safety. The soldiers chased him out.

"That white man, get him out of here!" one of the soldiers is heard saying in footage captured by television station France 24. "We don't want any of their kind here."

By the time the soldiers came for him, he had earned the nickname of "The Last Arab of Timbuktu."

On the morning of Feb. 14, the troops barricaded the street and surrounded his shop, according to witnesses. Vieux Ali was shaking so much, he couldn't get into the back of their pickup. They shoved him inside and made him lie under a tan-colored tarp.

They were about to drive away when Maouloud Fassoukoy — one of Vieux Ali's black neighbors — pushed his way past the cordon. He ran to the truck, screaming "No! No! No! He's not the enemy!"

The soldiers grabbed Fassoukoy too, and forced him to lie under the same tan tarp.

The truck meandered through the sand-swept lanes of Timbuktu, and by the end of the day a total of nine men were missing. Except for Fassoukoy, all were Arab.

The truck left the city, heading north. Toward the desert.

After he disappeared, Vieux Ali became a symbol of those who had gone missing. Supporters created a Facebook page. His lined face, grandfatherly air and insistence that he considered himself Malian moved people.

His presumed killing was a “test case,” according to Corinne Dufka, senior researcher for Human Rights Watch.

“Mali is hanging in the balance. It could go either way,” she said. “Depending on how this case is resolved, it can either reinforce the rule of law. Or reinforce impunity.”

However, the families of the nine missing men were too petrified to go to the dunes. And the army denied the killings to the public.

“What bodies?” asked Kone from the Ministry of Defense. “The Malian army respects human rights. We are here to protect the population.”

Among the Arabs who had fled were the relatives of my colleague, Baba Ahmed, who is himself an Arab from Timbuktu. It wasn’t long before concerned childhood friends began urging Baba to leave too.

Baba insisted on staying, saying he was protected by his affiliation with an international news organization. But while we were at the pharmacy counter a few days after Vieux Ali’s arrest, a military truck sped up. A soldier burst in and glared at Baba. Then he paused, realizing we were together.

We left the soldier at the counter. As we went out, I noticed a tan tarp covering the bed of the military truck, just like the one that had covered up Vieux Ali.

I couldn’t escape the conclusion that they had come to take Baba away.

Baba left, and I stayed in Timbuktu for another two weeks. Each successive translator I hired refused to go to the dunes.

Soldiers began making unannounced visits to my hotel, asking to speak to me.

Late one night, a Malian hotel employee approached me, smelling of alcohol. “I know what you are doing,” he said. “Everyone knows you’re here to sully the reputation of our troops.”

That afternoon, I asked the driver I had hired to sleep outside my room for protection.

I decided it was no longer safe to stay. Just before my departure, a source inside the Malian military asked to see me alone. He drew me a map.

Drive north, he said, past the cement flame, then veer left. All the other times I had veered right.

“Just wander around those dunes and you’ll see them,” he said. “The bodies are there.”

The next day, as I walked from dune to dune, I found an area where the dirt had coagulated. It was harder and darker, as if someone had poured water over the sand.

The driver grabbed a shovel. We dug a few feet until we could smell the body and then stopped. The sand looked wet. Flies gathered.

Later that day, I brought Ali’s son, Ibrahim Ould Ali, and three relatives of the other victims to the

spot. They took turns digging. Within minutes, the fingers of the dead man emerged. The victim had been buried face down, hands tied behind his back, his eyes bound with his turban.

I saw the dread leave Ibrahim's face. It was not his father.

A second man shared the same grave. Both were Tuaregs, by their features and hair. We would later learn the military had grabbed them from a village outside Timbuktu in January.

I left Mali.

Every few days at first, and then every few weeks, I received a call from Ibrahim, Vieux Ali's son. In broken French, he would ask me if I had news of his father.

The last time he called, it was to say he too had fled Timbuktu. He said: "The soldiers told me they would do the same thing to me as they had to my father."

In July, when I returned to Timbuktu to cover the country's presidential election, my source inside the Malian military agreed to meet me at my hotel.

He arrived with a soldier who had helped investigate the killings of the nine men for an internal military report, written under heavy pressure from human rights groups and the French. Based on the report, he said, the Ministry of Defense had detained five soldiers for questioning, but quietly let them go a few weeks later.

The families never got the bodies. Nor did the military ever confirm what we presumed by now: All nine were dead.

Nobody would let me use their names, because they were still too terrified of military reprisals. But finally, I pieced together what had happened to Ali.

On the day of Ali's death in February, a shepherd had just sold a load of charcoal at the Timbuktu market, according to the investigator. As the shepherd walked back across the desert with his donkey to his camp, he saw a military truck parked on the other side of a dune.

He ducked. Then he hurried back to town, where everyone was talking about the men who had just disappeared.

He returned the next day. On the other side of the dune, he saw three humps. The normally feathery surface of the sand was stiff with water.

That's where a unit of Malian troops had slit the men's throats with a knife, buried the bodies and washed their hands with a bottle of mineral water, the shepherd told investigators. He led them to the spot, where they unearthed the nine bodies to confirm the killings, then reburied them.

The investigator brought the shepherd to me, while I waited in my car near the dunes. The shepherd wore a tightly-wound black turban that exposed only his eyes, never taking it off. He took me to the burial site without a word.

For the last time, we drove north past the cement monument to a peace that has long eluded Mali.

This time we went down a path I had not travelled before. Near a clump of desert grasses, the shepherd signaled to stop.

He walked over to the base of a dune, bent down and traced an X in the sand with his finger. He made two more X's a few paces away. Then he walked off.

I yelled after him — which one is Vieux Ali's grave? How many feet down? Petrified, he kept walking.

I left a trail of paper torn from my notebook in order to remember my way back to the X's in the sand. Then I went to Ali's house — but the entire family had fled.

The only victim's relative I could find was Sidi Fassoukoy, the younger brother of Maoloud Fassoukoy, the neighbor who had tried to stop the soldiers from taking Ali and had been arrested too.

At the dune, Sidi began peeling away the layers of sand with a shovel. Something white poked out of the dirt.

It was the sole of a shoe.

Sidi took the white Reebok off the foot of the dead man.

"This is my shoe," he said, holding it up. "I bought this shoe and gave it to my brother as a present."

Nearly half a year after the murder, the flesh was gone. All that was left were bones, inside clothes.

Sidi uncovered an orange-and-white batik fabric covering the man's chest. He grabbed his own trousers to show the same print. The same tailor had made both sets of clothes.

He pulled the dead man up by the top of his batik shirt. What was left of the body fell away with the sand.

"This is Maoloud Fassoukoy," he said. "This is my brother."

It was getting dark, and I was starting to panic. What if the soldiers found us? I realized we would only have time to dig under the first of the three spots marked by the shepherd.

We were about to leave when we found another body. The dead man was wearing rubber sandals, and Sidi recognized them too.

"These are the shoes of the old man," he said. "This is Vieux Ali."

Vieux Ali left behind 16 children.

His eldest son, Mohamed Ould Ali, lives in Bamako, Mali's capital. He hired a lawyer to try to urge the courts to investigate his father's disappearance, but in vain.

His eyes well with tears as he looks at the digital photographs of his father's shallow grave. He instantly recognizes his father's sandals — plastic, wide-soled, the closest thing the old man could find to orthopedic shoes.

Mohamed calls his younger brother, Ibrahim, now in exile in Mauritania, who was with Vieux Ali on the day of his disappearance. Ibrahim recalls how his father had worn out the plastic band on the left toe of his sandals.

Mohamed enlarges the photograph. He points to a slight tear in the plastic just above the left toe.

"It's removed the doubt," Mohamed says. "It's like I can finally see the truth. I was chasing after a mirage. Because of my love for him, I kept hoping that he would be found alive." He adds: "Now can they continue to deny it?"

In his wallet, the son keeps a yellowing post-it note. It lists the names of the nine men grabbed that day: Maoloud Fassoukoy, Ali Ould Kabbad, Mohamed Lamine, Dana Dahama, Hama Ould Dahama, Mohamed Ould Mahmoud, Tidiane Ould Mahmoud, Sidi Mohamed Ould Ahmed, Youba Ould Ahmed.

There are still bodies missing.

And there are still two places back in the desert that a shepherd marked with an X to show where they may lie. Even though the wind long ago erased the marks in the sand.

* <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ap-reporters-quest-find-bodies-ends-desert>

* *This story was written by Rukmini Callimachi, the Associated Press bureau chief for West Africa. Associated Press writer Baba Ahmed contributed to this report from Timbuktu and Bamako, Mali.*

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<http://www.rogerannis.com/associated-press-finds-bodies-of-those-kidnapped-by-france-u-s-canada-allied-mali-military/>

Footnotes

[1] Here: <http://www.rogerannis.com/category/maliwar/>