



HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH

No One Is Spared

Abuses Against Older People in Armed Conflict



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Summary

The older woman told Human Rights Watch that the first time government soldiers and militias came to her village in South Sudan in 2015, all civilians were subject to attack. “The old men and women who couldn’t run were killed,” she said. “There was Gatpan Mut, for example, who was a little old, and Gatkui Jich, who couldn’t move, and many, many more whose names I can’t remember.”

Human Rights Watch research from 2013 to 2021 in 15 countries found that older people can experience the same abuses during armed conflict and other large-scale violence as younger people and in some circumstances face heightened risk related to their older age.

This report describes patterns of abuses against older people affected by armed conflict in Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, South Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine. It also draws on the situation of serious protracted violence in two English-speaking regions of Cameroon, Myanmar security force atrocities against older ethnic Rohingya in Rakhine State, and the experiences of older refugees in Lebanon displaced by conflict in Syria. It also includes abuses against older people in the 2020 armed conflict in the ethnic-Armenian-majority enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Government armed forces and non-state armed groups have unlawfully attacked and killed older civilians and subjected them to summary executions, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and other ill-treatment, rape, abduction and kidnapping, and the destruction of their homes and other property.

Older civilians have been killed and injured by small arms, heavy weapons, explosive weapons with wide area effects and chemical and other banned weapons. In Syria in March 2017, US aircraft attacked the Omar Ibn al-Khatab mosque near al-Jinah, a village in Aleppo province, where about 300 people had gathered for religious lectures and the Muslim Isha'a, or night prayer. The attack killed at least 38 people. “Mahmoud,” who witnessed the attack, said: “Some were old in their 70s and 80s, some young in their 20s,

children...There weren't any people affiliated with armed groups there, nothing of that sort.”

Government forces and non-state armed groups have summarily executed older people. In the Central African Republic, where a proliferation of armed groups has been fighting since 2013, Seleka forces executed Dieudonne, a 60-year-old man who had been hiding in a family compound nearby a displacement camp in July 2017. A witness said: “As he was pulled outside, Dieudonne said, ‘My sons, look at me. I am old and blind. I was just on the way to the camp to look for food. Why kill me?’ The Seleka did not respond, they just shot him in the chest.”

Government forces and non-state armed groups have arbitrarily arrested and detained older civilians. In Ethiopia in July 2021, after Tigrayan forces recaptured most of the Tigray region, authorities arbitrarily arrested and detained older Tigrayans in the capital, Addis Ababa. Amhara forces controlling the Western Tigray zone also detained older people in overcrowded detention sites and subjected them to beatings and other forms of ill-treatment.

Governments and non-state armed groups have subjected older people in their custody to various forms of torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Common cases reported include beating and kicking, use of stress positions, and sexual violence, as well as denying medical treatment, food, and water. In Mali, where Islamist armed groups and Malian security forces have engulfed civilians in conflict, a 60-year-old shepherd described his interrogation by Malian soldiers in 2015:

They tied me and hung me upside down from 2 a.m. to 5 a.m. They asked where the jihadists [Islamist fighters] were; I said I only care about my animals. Then a soldier thrust his gun into my face with force. I lost half my teeth. There was so much blood in my mouth, I vomited.... Are the soldiers there to protect or terrorize us?

Government forces and non-state armed groups have raped and committed other sexual violence against older women. In South Sudan, a rape survivor in her late 50s, said that

during government operations against rebel forces in February 2019, a soldier made her carry looted property, beat her with a gun, and raped her repeatedly.

Armies, militias, and rebel forces have destroyed and looted older people's property. Older people have described the devastation of losing everything they have spent their lives working towards. In May 2021, Israeli military airstrikes destroyed four high-rise buildings in Gaza City that contained many homes and businesses. Jawad Mahdi, 68, an owner of a destroyed building who lived there with dozens of family members, said: "All these years of hard work, it was a place of living, safety, children and grandchildren, all our history and life, destroyed in front of your eyes. ... It's like someone ripping your heart out and throwing it."

During hostilities older people have chosen not to flee their homes when fighting neared. They thought they would not be attacked, or wanted to protect their family's property, or had suffered physically or emotionally from fleeing earlier attacks. In many other instances, older people have been unable to flee because of limited mobility, disability, or because families could not assist their flight. In 2017, Rohingya who fled Myanmar security force atrocities in Rakhine State described security forces pushing older people who could not flee back into burning houses. "I saw them push my husband's uncle into the fire. I saw them push him back into the burning house," Hasina Begum said. "He is weak, maybe 80 years [old].... I think they wanted everyone to leave and those that could not leave they put into the fire."

Older people who have been displaced have faced abuse while in flight or in displacement camps. In the Far-North region of Cameroon, the Islamist armed group Boko Haram carried out attacks deliberately targeting civilians. A 70-year-old man living at a site for displaced people said he was woken up by gunfire in August 2020:

I immediately left the house and saw numerous Boko Haram fighters outside.... As I ran away for my life, they shot me in the stomach. I found myself on the ground, an inexplicable pain striking my body. I was bleeding profusely, and I lost consciousness. When I woke up, I was [in a hospital].

Displaced older people have also faced barriers to registering for and obtaining humanitarian assistance. In South Sudan in 2017, displaced older people who sought refuge in remote bush areas or on islands were more likely to encounter difficulties getting aid than those who found their way to the Protection of Civilian sites inside UN bases.

Other groups have documented similar abuses against older people affected by conflict. For example, Amnesty International has published reports on crimes under international law and other abuses against older people in conflicts in Mozambique, Myanmar, Northeast Nigeria, and South Sudan. HelpAge International, a non-governmental organization working with and for older people, has documented the failure of humanitarian actors to meet humanitarian standards and be inclusive of older people in their responses to conflict-driven displacements in Ethiopia, Jordan, South Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, and Yemen.

While older people are protected by international humanitarian law and international human rights law during armed conflict, in practice their needs and protections are often disregarded by the parties to the conflict. Governments, non-state armed groups, peacekeeping missions and the relevant United Nations agencies should do more to ensure adequate recognition and protection of older people from abuse during conflict.

The UN Secretary-General's Protection of Civilian reports from 1998 to 2021 have paid little attention to older people with five brief mentions. The Secretary-General's 2019 report on older people in emergency crises, including those due to armed conflict, addressed barriers to humanitarian assistance but not abuses during conflict itself. Only one UN Security Council resolution, on Sudan in 2007, has condemned violent attacks on older civilians.

Because of the heightened risk they may face, older people require special attention by UN agencies and peacekeeping missions, aid organizations, governments, and others who have the ability to aid and offer protection to people in conflict situations and in humanitarian responses to older people displaced by conflict.

All parties to armed conflict should protect and prevent abuses against older people and facilitate humanitarian assistance to older people in need. States should end impunity for crimes against older people and ensure their access to justice.

Recommendations

To Governments Involved in Armed Conflicts

- Abide by international humanitarian law and human rights law, including with respect to ending abuses and minimizing harm to older people;
- Investigate alleged violations of international law, including against older civilians, and appropriately hold those responsible to account;
- Ensure all strategies for civilian protection include specific references to the circumstances and requirements of older civilians;
- Ensure the United Nations and other impartial humanitarian agencies have full access to populations needing assistance, including older people;
- Ensure people, including older people, have access to avenues of redress for violations of their rights; and
- Enable the meaningful participation and representation of older people, including their representative organizations, in strategies for civilian protection, humanitarian action, conflict prevention, resolution, reconciliation, reconstruction, and peacebuilding.

To National Legislatures

- Hold hearings into the impact of armed conflict on older people to hear directly from those affected, examine information produced, and make recommendations on ensuring protection of older civilians in armed conflict and providing redress for violations of their rights.

To National Human Rights Institutions

- Monitor and investigate alleged violations of international law against older people in armed conflict and make the findings public; and
- Receive, investigate, and address complaints of rights violations against older people so that victims and their families can seek redress.

To the Leadership of Non-State Armed Groups

- Abide by international humanitarian law, including with respect to ending abuses and minimizing harm to older people; and
- Take appropriate disciplinary action against armed group members responsible for abuses, including against older people.

To the United Nations Security Council

- Ensure that the need for enhanced protection of older civilians, including older people with disabilities and older women who may be at particular risk, in armed conflict is recognized and addressed in a comprehensive manner in the work of the Security Council;
- Request that reports related to conflict situations submitted to the UN Security Council include specific information about the situation of older people in armed conflict and their enhanced need for protection; and
- Require that UN agencies, missions, and country teams monitor and regularly report on the situation of older people in all conflicts and humanitarian crises.

To the United Nations Human Rights Council

- Ensure that the need for enhanced protection of older civilians, including older people with disabilities and older women who may be at particular risk, in armed conflict is recognized and addressed in a comprehensive manner in the work of the Human Rights Council; and
- Request that reports related to conflict situations submitted to the Human Rights Council include specific information about the situation of older people in armed conflict and their enhanced need for protection.

To United Nations and Other Peacekeeping Missions

- Ensure that human rights officers thoroughly investigate and publicly report on all abuses in armed conflict, including abuses against older people;
- Ensure that international peacekeeping troops deployed to conflict zones are appropriately equipped, supported, and mandated to effectively protect older civilians as well as other people in need of protection; and

- Promote awareness of the rights of older people across all UN departments and agencies involved in peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations and boost the capacity of those departments and agencies to protect those rights.

To Humanitarian Agencies

- Assist relevant government authorities to ensure that displaced older people have access to adequate food, health care, shelter, and psychosocial (mental health) support. Provide older people with equal access to information about these and other services;
- Ensure the participation of older people in the design, implementation, and monitoring of humanitarian assistance;
- Interview older people directly as part of needs assessments to avoid the risk of older people being overlooked in household-level surveys;
- Include analysis of the specific needs of older people in humanitarian response plans and funding proposals;
- Ensure that facilities in displacement camps, including access to sanitation facilities, are accessible to older people; and
- Ensure that information campaigns, safe spaces for women and girls, and health services, are inclusive and accessible to displaced older people so they can report sexual and gender-based violence, obtain health and support services, and seek redress.

To Donors

- Ensure the inclusion of older people in humanitarian assistance by including older people in humanitarian needs assessments, making all aid accessible, and having partners report implementation disaggregated by age, gender, and disability;
- Incorporate criteria to include older people in funding guidelines and program portfolios, aligning with wider inclusion mainstreaming initiatives and coordinating with other donors to ensure a common approach; and
- Ensure that support to UN agencies includes requirements to effectively monitor and report on humanitarian assistance to older people.

Methodology

Human Rights Watch has documented unlawful attacks and other violations against civilians in armed conflicts around the world. This report on abuses against older people is based on an analysis of Human Rights Watch research carried out between 2013 and 2021 in international and non-international armed conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the ethnic-Armenian majority enclave Nagorno-Karabakh, in Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, South Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine and on people displaced by conflict in Syria. It also includes research on the situation of serious protracted violence in two English-speaking regions of Cameroon and on atrocities against ethnic Rohingya in Myanmar. This report is not meant to be a comprehensive accounting of wartime abuses against older people in these conflicts.

Material used in this report covers the timeframe of the original research and the conflicts may have developed and changed over time. This report does not make any new assessments of alleged perpetrators or the nature of specific abuses but, with the exception of two unpublished Human Rights Watch interviews from Cameroon, relies on analysis in the relevant existing Human Rights Watch reports.

Human Rights Watch's research on these conflicts has included interviewing, in person or by phone, victims of abuses, relatives and friends of victims, and witnesses to abuses; detainees; religious and community leaders; journalists; members of civil society groups and international nongovernmental organizations; commanders of armed forces; government and security officials; and diplomats and United Nations officials. Human Rights Watch has also reviewed relevant photographs and video, court, police, and other documents.

In many cases, Human Rights Watch research did not focus on the particular experience of older people but documented their situations together with that of younger people. In other instances, research found that older people faced heightened risk related to their age. More research is needed into the extent to which older people are targeted, how, why, and what specific prevention and protection measures would be most effective. However,

by bringing these experiences together in one report, we highlight that abuses are committed against older people in many countries and armed conflicts of both an international and non-international nature.

This report includes accounts from people in their 50s through their 90s. There is no definition of an older person in international law. In some contexts, people in their 50s can be considered to have characteristics and face barriers associated with older age. In relation to conflict situations, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2021 Emergency Handbook on Older Persons states that “the psychological and psychosocial toll of traumatic experiences, combined with poor nutrition and exposure to disease, can cause refugees and internally displaced people to ‘age’ faster than settled populations.”¹ This report also reflects the diversity of older people, including older women, older men, older refugees and displaced older people, older people with disabilities, and older people of different economic, social, religious or marital status.

¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “Emergency Handbook: Older Persons,” June 6, 2021, <https://www.humanitarianlibrary.org/sites/default/files/2021/06/Emergency%20handbook%20%282%29.pdf> (accessed October 21, 2021).

Background

This section includes short descriptions of the situations referenced in this report. It does not provide full background on each of the specific conflicts, many of which are protracted and some of which involve multiple parties to the conflict. Further information regarding each conflict, including full details on research methodology for the relevant reports, can be found in the relevant country reports at www.hrw.org.

Armenia/Azerbaijan: The armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan started in the final years of the Soviet era, when Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnic-Armenian majority enclave in Azerbaijan, sought unification with Armenia. Clashes eventually turned into a full-scale war between Azerbaijani and Armenian troops, which ended in 1994 with ethnic Armenian forces taking control of seven Azerbaijani districts around the enclave, creating a security buffer zone around Nagorno-Karabakh and a land connection to Armenia. The conflict forcibly displaced over one million people. Nagorno-Karabakh declared independence in 1991, but it has not been recognized by any United Nations member state or by multilateral organizations. Hostilities escalated in September 2020, with Azerbaijan's military offensive. This report includes cases and accounts from the six-week war in 2020 when Azerbaijani forces took control of areas in and around the region.²

Burkina Faso: Since 2015, large parts of Burkina Faso have been engulfed in violence and atrocities committed by armed Islamist groups, state security forces engaged in counterterrorism operations, and pro-government militias. Armed Islamist groups have concentrated recruitment efforts on the nomadic Peuhl, or Fulani, by exploiting community grievances over poverty and public sector corruption. This has inflamed tensions with other largely agrarian communities, notably the Foulse, Mossi, Songhai, and Gourmantche. The vast majority of atrocities by pro-government forces have targeted the Peuhl, while the agrarian communities have disproportionately been targeted by the armed Islamists. This report includes cases and accounts from April and December 2019 when government

² Tanya Lokshina (Human Rights Watch), "Survivors of Unlawful Detention in Nagorno-Karabakh Speak Out about War Crimes," commentary, *Open Democracy*, March 12, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/12/survivors-unlawful-detention-nagorno-karabakh-speak-out-about-war-crimes>; "Armenia: Cluster Munitions Kill Civilians in Azerbaijan," Human Rights Watch news release, October 30, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/30/armenia-cluster-munitions-kill-civilians-azerbaijan>; "Azerbaijan: Cluster Munitions Used in Nagorno-Karabakh," Human Rights Watch news release, October 23, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/23/azerbaijan-cluster-munitions-used-nagorno-karabakh>.

forces and armed Islamist groups committed targeted attacks and summary executions that killed over 250 civilians, including older people, and from 2020 when armed Islamist groups abducted several local government officials and prominent elders.³

Cameroon's Far-North region: Since 2014, Boko Haram, the armed Islamist group that originated in northeastern Nigeria and aspires to establish a caliphate in Nigeria and West Africa, has been carrying out attacks in northern Cameroon that are often indiscriminate or deliberately target civilians. This report includes a case from August 2020 when Boko Haram used apparent child suicide bombers in an unlawful attack on a site for displaced people in Nguetechewe, a town in the Far North region. In August 2020, Human Rights Watch interviewed fourteen victims and witnesses to the Nguetechewe attack, as well as a local medical worker, two humanitarian workers, and three local activists.⁴

Cameroon's English-speaking regions of North-West and South-West: The current crisis in the Anglophone regions in Cameroon began after government forces violently repressed peaceful strikes by Anglophone lawyers and teachers in October and November 2016. They were protesting what they perceived as the central government's attempts to marginalize and assimilate Anglophone courts and schools into the Francophone system. Similar heavy-handed response by security forces against peaceful protests to celebrate the symbolic independence of "Ambazonia," the name given by secessionists to their self-proclaimed independent state comprising the North-West and South-West regions, occurred again between September 22 and October 2, 2017.⁵

Since then, armed separatist groups began to emerge, engaging in fighting with government forces and leading to a situation of serious protracted violence, with both

³ Corinne Dufka (Human Rights Watch), "Burkina Faso's Atrocities in the Name of Security Will Help Terrorists' Ranks," commentary, *Washington Post*, June 12, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/06/12/burkina-fasos-atrocities-name-security-will-help-terrorists-ranks/>; "Burkina Faso: Armed Islamist Atrocities Surge," Human Rights Watch news release, January 6, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/06/burkina-faso-armed-islamist-atrocities-surge>; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2021* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021), Burkina Faso chapter, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/burkina-faso>.

⁴ "Cameroon: Boko Haram Suicide Bombers Strike Displacement Site," Human Rights Watch news release, August 25, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/25/cameroon-boko-haram-suicide-bombers-strike-displacement-site>.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, *"These Killings Can Be Stopped": Government and Separatist Groups Abuses in Cameroon's Anglophone Regions* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2018), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/cameroon0718_web2.pdf.

sides responsible for serious human rights abuses. This report includes cases of attacks on civilians including older people documented by Human Rights Watch since 2017.⁶

Central African Republic: Violence erupted in the Central African Republic in 2012 when the Seleka, a coalition of mainly Muslim rebel groups, accused the government of failing to abide by peace agreements. In 2013, Seleka rebels forcibly seized power and a transitional government established. Though the Seleka was formally disbanded, new rebel groups known as ex-Seleka continued committing violent acts. By the end of 2013, the crisis deepened when anti-Balaka forces, mainly Christian armed groups, took up arms against Muslims in retaliation. Ceasefires signed in 2014 and 2015 did not end the conflict. In 2017, fighting between a proliferation of armed groups further exacerbated the conflict. This report includes cases and accounts from 2015 to 2017 as documented in three separate Human Rights Watch reports.⁷

Ethiopia: The outbreak of armed conflict in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, in November 2020 between Ethiopian federal government forces and fighters affiliated with Tigray's regional authorities, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), has resulted in human rights and humanitarian crises, with reports of large-scale massacres, pillage, destruction of civilian infrastructure, forcible displacement, and widespread sexual violence, including against older women. After Tigrayan troops retook the regional capital, Mekelle, in June 2021, Ethiopian authorities arbitrarily detained, forcibly disappeared, and committed other abuses against ethnic Tigrayans in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. This report includes cases of older Tigrayans targeted and detained in Addis Ababa, older Tigrayans arbitrarily detained and forcibly expelled from Western Tigray, and findings from Human Rights Watch's documentation between November 2020 and October 2021 of the health impacts of conflict-related sexual violence and the lack of access to medical care and mental

⁶ "Cameroon: Make Humanitarian Response More Inclusive," Human Rights Watch news release, December 10, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/10/cameroon-make-humanitarian-response-more-inclusive>; "Cameroon: New Attacks on Civilians By Troops, Separatists," Human Rights Watch news release, March 28, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/28/cameroon-new-attacks-civilians-troops-separatists>.

⁷ "Central African Republic: Civilians Targeted as Violence Surges," Human Rights Watch news release, October 27, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/27/central-african-republic-civilians-targeted-violence-surges>; "Central African Republic: People with Disabilities at High Risk," Human Rights Watch news release, June 21, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/21/central-african-republic-people-disabilities-high-risk>; Human Rights Watch, *Killing Without Consequence: War Crimes, Crimes Against Humanity and the Special Criminal Court in the Central African Republic* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/07/05/killing-without-consequence/war-crimes-crimes-against-humanity-and-special>.

health and psychosocial support services in the Tigray region.⁸ This report also contains findings from Human Rights Watch’s documentation of summary executions of Amhara civilians by Tigrayan forces in Ethiopia’s northern Amhara region between August 31 and September 9, 2021.⁹

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory: Israeli authorities are committing the crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution against millions of Palestinians.¹⁰ For more than half a century, Israel has militarily occupied the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, and committed systematic rights abuses against the Palestinians living there. For the last 14 years, Israeli authorities have imposed a generalized closure on Gaza, sharply restricting the movement of people and goods.¹¹ During this time, Israeli security forces and Palestinian armed groups have engaged in armed hostilities and committed serious violations of the laws of war, including war crimes.

This report includes cases and accounts from the May 2021 hostilities, which included Israeli strikes that killed scores of civilians and destroyed high-rise Gaza towers containing homes and businesses, with no evident military targets in the vicinity, as well as indiscriminate rocket attacks launched by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups towards Israeli cities.¹²

Human Rights Watch wrote several reports about violations committed during the fighting. In the course of the research, it interviewed 60 Israelis and Palestinians who witnessed or were victims of attacks, were relatives of civilians killed, or were residents of areas

⁸ “Ethiopia: Ethnic Tigrayans Forcibly Disappeared,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 18, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/18/ethiopia-ethnic-tigrayans-forcibly-disappeared>; “Ethiopia: New Wave of Atrocities in Western Tigray,” Human Rights Watch news release, December 16, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/16/ethiopia-new-wave-atrocities-western-tigray>; Human Rights Watch, *“I Always Remember That Day”: Access to Services for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence in Ethiopia’s Tigray Region*, (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/11/09/i-always-remember-day/access-services-survivors-gender-based-violence-ethiopia>.

⁹ “Ethiopia: Tigray Forces Summarily Execute Civilians,” Human Rights Watch news release, December 9, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/10/ethiopia-tigray-forces-summarily-execute-civilians>.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, *A Threshold Crossed, Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Gaza: Israel’s May Airstrikes on High-Rises,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 23, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/23/gaza-israels-may-airstrikes-high-rises>; “Palestinian Rockets in May Killed Civilians in Israel, Gaza,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 12, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/12/palestinian-rockets-may-killed-civilians-israel-gaza?fbclid=IwAR1NCMCJ31qRwdhyqC-T3NRQDpiDUa51rs3lhRHeNg6Yr3ahQbLrFm9p8vE>.

targeted. Human Rights Watch also visited the site of strikes, inspected remnants of munitions, and analyzed statements by officials and armed groups, satellite imagery, video footage, and photographs taken following the attacks.¹³

Mali: In 2012, Mali's northern regions fell to separatist ethnic Tuareg and Al-Qaeda-linked armed groups. The French-led military intervention in 2013 and the June 2015 peace agreement between the government and several armed groups resulted in some stability in the north. This report includes cases and accounts from 2015 when atrocities by Islamist armed groups and abusive responses by Malian security forces and pro-government militias spread south, engulfing more civilians in the conflict, and from 2019 when alleged armed ethnic Dogon groups attacked Peuhl communities.¹⁴

Mozambique: The wave of violence in Cabo Delgado province began in October 2017, when suspected armed Islamist groups attacked a string of police stations, resulting in a massive military response that led to the evacuation of villages. Following the attacks, authorities closed mosques and detained hundreds of people without charge. This report includes cases from May and June 2018 involving attacks by the armed group known both as Al-Sunna wa Jama'a (ASWJ) and "mashababos" (the local name for Al-Shabab).¹⁵

Myanmar: Ethnic Rohingya, a largely Muslim minority, have faced decades of discrimination, repression, and violence in Myanmar, including large-scale attacks amounting to crimes against humanity. In August 2017, following attacks by a Rohingya armed group, Myanmar security forces launched a campaign of mass atrocities, including killings, rape, and widespread arson, against Rohingya in northern Rakhine State that forced more than 730,000 to flee across the border into Bangladesh. Approximately 130,000 Rohingya displaced in attacks in 2012 remain effectively detained in camps in central Rakhine State in squalid and oppressive conditions amounting to the crimes against humanity of persecution, apartheid, and severe deprivation of liberty. This report

¹³ Ibid., and "Gaza: Apparent War Crimes During May Fighting," Human Rights Watch news release, July 27, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/27/gaza-apparent-war-crimes-during-may-fighting>.

¹⁴ "Mali: Abuses Spread South," Human Rights Watch news release, February 19, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/19/mali-abuses-spread-south>; Human Rights Watch, "How Much More Blood Must Be Spilled?": Atrocities Against Civilians in Central Mali, 2019 (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2020), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/malio220_web.pdf.

¹⁵ "Mozambique: Armed Groups Burn Villages," Human Rights Watch news release, June 19, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/19/mozambique-armed-groups-burn-villages>.

includes accounts from witnesses to and survivors of attacks by Myanmar security forces on Rohingya in Rakhine State in 2017 and those caught up in fighting between Myanmar security forces and the Arakan Army, an ethnic Rakhine armed group, in 2019-20.¹⁶

Niger: Since 2015, armed Islamist groups have carried out attacks against Niger's security forces and civilians. Until 2019, most of these attacks occurred in southeastern Niger and in western Niger since 2019. Throughout the Sahel, Islamist armed groups have concentrated recruitment efforts on the nomadic Peuhl, which has inflamed existing tensions over access to land and water between the Peuhl and various agrarian groups, including the Zarma, and certain Tuareg clans. This report includes cases between January and July 2021 when Islamist armed groups killed over 420 civilians and drove tens of thousands from their homes during attacks in western Niger.¹⁷

South Sudan: The conflict in South Sudan began in December 2013 when forces loyal to President Salva Kiir – a Dinka – clashed in the capital, Juba, with those of his then-vice president, Riek Machar – a Nuer. South Sudan's leaders signed a peace agreement in September 2018, but the conflict continued, primarily in parts of Central Equatoria state, where the National Salvation Front (NAS), an armed group formed in March 2017, continued to fight against government forces. This report includes cases and accounts from displaced older people, including those with disabilities.¹⁸

This report also includes cases and accounts from between December 2018 and March 2019 when government soldiers carried out extensive abuses against civilians during counterinsurgency operations in the area then known as Yei River state.¹⁹

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Massacre by the River: Burmese Army Crimes against Humanity in Tula Toli* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2017), https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/12/19/massacre-river/burmese-army-crimes-against-humanity-tula-toli#_ftn34; *"All of My Body Was Pain": Sexual Violence against Rohingya Women and Girls in Burma* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2017), https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/11/16/all-my-body-was-pain/sexual-violence-against-rohingya-women-and-girls-burma#_ftn68; "Myanmar: Civilians Caught in Surge of Fighting," Human Rights Watch news release, March 4, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/04/myanmar-civilians-caught-surge-fighting>.

¹⁷ "Niger: Surging Atrocities by Armed Islamist Groups," Human Rights Watch news release, August 11, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/11/niger-surging-atrocities-armed-islamist-groups>.

¹⁸ "South Sudan: People with Disabilities, Older People Face Danger," Human Rights Watch news release, May 31, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/31/south-sudan-people-disabilities-older-people-face-danger>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, and "South Sudan: Government Forces Abusing Civilians," Human Rights Watch news release, June 4, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/04/south-sudan-government-forces-abusing-civilians>.

Syria: What started in Syria in 2011 as a peaceful uprising against a government with an abysmal human rights record turned into an armed conflict involving multiple local factions, non-state armed groups, and international powers. In the decade since, the conflict has resulted in the deaths of at least 350,000 people and has displaced millions more. This report includes accounts of older people affected by the conflict from 2013 to 2020, and older refugees who voluntarily returned to Syria between 2017 and 2021 from Lebanon and who faced grave human rights abuses and persecution at the hands of Syrian government and affiliated militias, including torture, extrajudicial killings, and kidnappings.²⁰

Ukraine: In February 2014, Russian government forces occupied the Crimean Peninsula. Two months later Russia-backed armed groups in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine declared the establishment of the “Donetsk People’s Republic” and “Luhansk People’s Republic” and held referendums to declare independence from Ukraine. Clashes between armed groups and Ukrainian government forces intensified, with Russian forces not only actively supporting the armed groups but also taking part in military operations within Ukraine. The ongoing hostilities in eastern Ukraine constitute an international armed conflict between Ukraine and Russia. This report includes cases and accounts from older people in the nongovernment-controlled areas of eastern Ukraine where the government stopped funding services.²¹

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Kidnapped by ISIS: Failure to Uncover the Fate of Syria’s Missing* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2020), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/02/11/kidnapped-isis/failure-uncover-fate-syrias-missing>; *If the Dead Could Speak: Mass Deaths and Torture in Syria’s Detention Facilities* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2015), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/12/16/if-dead-could-speak/mass-deaths-and-torture-syrias-detention-facilities#6689>; *Death by Chemicals: The Syrian Government’s Widespread and Systematic Use of Chemical Weapons* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/05/01/death-chemicals/syrian-governments-widespread-and-systematic-use-chemical-weapons>; *Attack on the Omar Ibn al-Khatab Mosque: US Authorities’ Failure to Take Adequate Precautions* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/04/18/attack-omar-ibn-al-khatab-mosque/us-authorities-failure-take-adequate-precautions>; “Russia/Syria: Deadly Airstrikes on Trapped Civilians,” Human Rights Watch news release, October 31, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/31/russia/syria-deadly-airstrikes-trapped-civilians>; “Syrian Army Accused of Targeting Older Women,” Human Rights Watch news release, March 3, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/03/syrian-army-accused-targeting-older-women>; “*Targeting Life in Idlib*: Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure” (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2020), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure>; “*Our Lives Are Like Death*: Syrian Refugee Returns from Lebanon and Jordan” (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/10/20/our-lives-are-death/syrian-refugee-returns-lebanon-and-jordan>; “Hussein Essou, Peaceful Activist,” Human Rights Watch news release, September 11, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/09/11/hussein-essou-peaceful-activist>; and “Khalil Maatouk, Lawyer,” Human Rights Watch news release, September 16, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/09/16/khalil-maatouk-lawyer>.

²¹ Laura Mills, “Money Slipped through My Fingers Like Water,” Human Rights Watch commentary, June 14, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/14/money-slipped-through-my-fingers-water>; “Ukraine: People with Limited Mobility Can’t Access Pensions,” Human Rights Watch news release, January 24, 2020,

Abuses against Older People in Armed Conflict

Human Rights Watch research from 2013 to 2021 in 15 countries has found that older people can experience both the same abuses during armed conflict as younger people and in some circumstances face heightened risk related to their older age.

Killings of Older Civilians

Government forces and non-state armed groups have killed older civilians in numerous countries. Older civilians have been killed and injured by small arms, heavy weapons, explosive weapons with wide area effects, and chemical and other banned weapons.

Suspected members of an armed Islamist group known as Al-Sunna wa Jama'a (ASWJ) burned houses and attacked civilians in villages in Mozambique's northern province of Cabo Delgado in 2018.²² Residents in the village of Nathuko described one attack in which an unidentified group of masked men arrived in the village carrying machetes and started setting houses on fire. They beheaded an older man and burned down at least 100 homes, according to a local government official.²³

In 2017, Human Rights Watch documented war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by Seleka, a coalition of mainly Muslim rebel groups, and anti-balaka, mainly Christian, forces in the central regions of the Central African Republic between late 2014 and April 2017.²⁴ In January 2015, anti-balaka forces attacked a group of five Muslim men, most of them older, who had come to the village of Senga in Nana-Grébizi Province to buy salt, killing four. The only survivor of the attack said:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/24/ukraine-people-limited-mobility-cant-access-pensions>; "Ukraine: Barriers to Free Movement for Older People," Human Rights Watch news release, November 29, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/11/29/ukraine-barriers-free-movement-older-people>; "Ukraine: Covid-19 Rules Blocked Access to Pensions," Human Rights Watch news release, August 3, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/03/ukraine-covid-19-rules-blocked-access-pensions>.

²² "Mozambique: Armed Groups Burn Villages," Human Rights Watch news release, June 19, 2018.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Killing Without Consequence: War Crimes, Crimes Against Humanity and the Special Criminal Court in the Central African Republic*.

Before the attack a leader from the anti-balaka came into the camp [where we lived] and asked for cows. We gave him five, and he said, “Now you can pass through the village with no problems.” The five of us went into the town, but some of the anti-balaka stopped us on the way and asked us where we were going. We explained and one said, “No, stay here.” They started to talk among themselves, and they came back and just started to shoot us. They shot Aladji Tambaya, a very old man, in the head. I was shot in the foot, and I fell with the others. In the melee, I crawled away. Three of the men killed were very old.²⁵

In May 2021, amid discriminatory efforts to force Palestinians out of their homes in occupied East Jerusalem, 11 days of hostilities broke out between the Israeli government and Palestinian armed groups in Gaza and Israel. One particular set of Israeli airstrikes, on May 16, killed 44 civilians and reportedly injured 50, after three buildings collapsed.²⁶ The Israeli military said it was targeting tunnels and an underground command center used by armed groups but presented no details to support that claim. Among those killed were older people, ages 63 to 93: Ameen al-Qoulaq (Abu Waseem), 63; Saeeda Youssef al-Qoulaq (Om Fayez), 86; Ameen Mohammad al-Qoulaq (Abu Fayez), 93; Ayman Tawfiq Abu al-Awf, 50; Sobhia Ismail Abu al-Awf, 68; Tawfiq Ismail Abu al-Awf, 80; and Fawaz Majdiya Abu al-Awf, 82.²⁷

Two Palestinian rocket strikes, investigated by Human Rights Watch, killed three civilians in Israel. These included Leah Yom Tov, 63, who was killed at her home in Rishon LeZion, south of Tel Aviv, on the evening of May 11; and Khalil Awad, 52, killed in front of his home in the Palestinian village of Dahmash in central Israel, about 20 kilometers from Tel Aviv, in the early morning of May 12.²⁸ Human Rights Watch determined, based on witness accounts during site visits, munition remnants, and a review of video footage, that another Palestinian rocket misfired in the city of Jabalya in the northern Gaza Strip on the evening

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “Gaza: Apparent War Crimes During May Fighting,” Human Rights Watch news release, July 27, 2021.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “Palestinian Rockets in May Killed Civilians in Israel, Gaza,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 12, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/12/palestinian-rockets-may-killed-civilians-israel-gaza>.

of May 10, killing seven civilians, including two older people, Ismat al-Zain, 50, and Basheer Aloush, 54.²⁹

In western Niger, during attacks by Islamist armed groups in 2021, one older woman wept as she described the impact of losing her husband and several sons. She said: “They took all that gives us meaning – our husbands, our children, our clan chief, our imam, our animals. What am I without them? I begged them to kill me too.”³⁰

In Syria, just before 7 p.m. on March 16, 2017, US aircraft attacked the Omar Ibn al-Khatab mosque near al-Jinah, a village in Aleppo province, where about 300 people had gathered for religious lectures and the Muslim Isha'a, or night prayer. The attack completely destroyed the service section of the mosque and killed at least 38 people. “Mahmoud,” who witnessed the attack, said: “Some were old in their 70s and 80s, some young in their 20s, children. I know most of them, they’re from the village. There weren’t any people affiliated with armed groups there, nothing of that sort.”³¹

Human Rights Watch has also documented four attacks between December 2016 and April 2017, in which Syrian government warplanes appear to have carried out aerial attacks with nerve agents, a group of chemicals that includes sarin: on Jrouh and al-Salaliyah in eastern Hama governorate on December 12, 2016; near al-Lataminah village in Hama governorate on March 30, 2017; and, on Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib governorate on April 4, 2017.³² Human Rights Watch identified 159 people who reportedly died in the attacks from chemical exposure, including at least 12 older people.³³

Both Azerbaijan and Armenia used widely banned weapons during the six-week war over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. Azerbaijan repeatedly used internationally banned cluster munitions in residential areas in Nagorno-Karabakh. A 69-year-old woman in Stepanakert, Nagorno-Karabakh’s administrative center, said her building began to shake around 7:15 a.m. on September 27, 2020: “The children started to scream and everyone was panicking

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ “Niger: Surging Atrocities by Armed Islamist Groups,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 11, 2021.

³¹ Human Rights Watch, *Attack on the Omar Ibn al-Khatab Mosque*.

³² Human Rights Watch, *Death by Chemicals: The Syrian Government’s Widespread and Systematic Use of Chemical Weapons*.

³³ Human Rights Watch casualty list, unpublished document on file with Human Rights Watch.

when the bombs started coming down. We opened the windows and saw that the cars were burning. We saw that they had small pink things that were making them burn, so we ran down to the basement.”³⁴ On October 28, 2020, Armenian forces either fired or supplied internationally banned cluster munitions and at least one other type of long-range rocket used in an attack on Barda city, 230 kilometers west of Azerbaijan’s capital, Baku.³⁵ The General Prosecutor’s Office of Azerbaijan reported that the attack killed at least 21 civilians, including six older people.³⁶

Summary Executions

Government forces and non-state armed groups have summarily executed older people.

In Burkina Faso in 2019, armed Islamist groups committed targeted attacks and summary executions that killed over 250 civilians.³⁷ Witnesses said that assailants sought to justify killings by linking victims to the government, the West, or Christian beliefs. For example, in July 2019, alleged Islamist fighters killed 22 civilians during an attack on Dibilou village. A witness who helped bury the dead described finding the bodies in the market, on the roads, and up to four kilometers away:

We buried 19 in town. A few days later, we went in search of people who were unaccounted for, and found three more in their farms, shot in the head. There were 22 souls, all men, ages from 70 to 25, and all Mossi.³⁸

In October, Islamist fighters executed 11 men in the Pobe Mengao village in the Sahel region. A villager who participated in the burial said:

³⁴ “Azerbaijan: Cluster Munitions Used in Nagorno-Karabakh,” Human Rights Watch news release, October 23, 2020.

³⁵ “Armenia: Cluster Munitions Kill Civilians in Azerbaijan,” Human Rights Watch news release, October 30, 2020.

³⁶ General Prosecutor’s Office of the Republic of Azerbaijan, “A criminal case has been launched into the fact that Armenian armed forces fired rockets at Barda” (“Erməni silahlı qüvvələrinin Bərdəni raket atəşinə tutması faktına görə cinayət işi başlamışdır”), October 29, 2020, <http://archive.today/2022.01.18-091957>, and <https://genprosecutor.gov.az/az/post/3116> (accessed January 21, 2022).

³⁷ “Burkina Faso: Armed Islamist Atrocities Surge,” Human Rights Watch news release, January 6, 2020.

³⁸ Ibid.

I saw 11 dead, ... executed in a line, in the middle of the village, many shot in the head. The dead were between 40 to 75 years old. We later found two others in the bush. The 13 were buried in three common graves.³⁹

Government forces conducted killings during raids in northern Burkina Faso in 2019. In February, after a raid on Belharo village, witnesses said that nine suspected Islamist fighters were found dead after being detained by government forces. One witness said, “We found Hamadoun, 72 years old, with both knees and his forehead on the ground, like he’d asked to pray before being shot.”⁴⁰

In Ethiopia’s northern Amhara region, Tigrayan forces summarily executed dozens of civilians in two towns they controlled between August and September 2021. One woman, Eyerusalem, said that just before Tigrayan forces left Chenna on September 4, they killed her 60-year-old father and her 67-year-old grandfather’s brother:

Tigrayan fighters who were being pushed out of [Digansa sub-village] by Ethiopian soldiers came into our compound. They were angry that they were losing the battle. Just before they left, they took my father and great uncle outside the front of the compound. Two of them tied my father’s hands behind his back and then shot him. Four of them then shot my great uncle.⁴¹

In the Central African Republic, fighters from the Central African Patriotic Movement (MPC), a Seleka armed group that controlled territory across the center-north of the country, attacked the Batangafo displacement camp in Ouham province on July 29, 2017.⁴² “Edith,” 47, said she hid in a family compound on the outskirts of the camp. A relative of Edith’s, Victor Ouingaïfonan, 51, was also hiding in one of the homes. She said:

They pulled Victor from where he was hiding and took him outside. One Seleka shot him in the chest. He was still breathing so another Seleka

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Corinne Dufka (Human Rights Watch), “Burkina Faso’s Atrocities in the Name of Security Will Help Terrorists’ Ranks.”

⁴¹ “Ethiopia: Tigray Forces Summarily Execute Civilians,” Human Rights Watch news release, December 9, 2021.

⁴² “Central African Republic: Civilians Targeted as Violence Surges,” Human Rights Watch news release, October 27, 2017.

walked up and cut his throat. He did not even have time to beg for his life, they just shot him right away.⁴³

The Seleka then pulled Dieudonne Wabone, a 60-year-old man, outside. Edith said:

They then found Dieudonne hiding among the women. As he was pulled outside, he said, “My sons, look at me. I am old and blind. I was just on the way to the camp to look for food. Why kill me?” The Seleka did not respond, they just shot him in the chest.⁴⁴

In one incident in Syria in March 2020, videos obtained by a media outlet suggested that the Syrian government’s elite special mission force opened fire on older women as they prepared to flee from advancing troops in Aleppo. The video shows the older women gathering their belongings and preparing to escape when they appear to come under gunfire.⁴⁵

Arbitrary Detention

Since late June 2021, Ethiopian authorities arbitrarily detained, forcibly disappeared, and committed other abuses against ethnic Tigrayans in Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa, after Tigrayan forces recaptured the regional capital, Mekelle, and government forces withdrew from most of the Tigray region.⁴⁶ Former detainees in Addis Ababa said that after their release they encountered many Tigrayans while in custody. One estimated seeing about 200 Tigrayans, among them a number of older people, at the Addis Ababa Police Commission in late July:

There were 80-year-old priests, monks, church administrators, government officers.... I think most of them were arrested from the day after Mekelle was controlled by the TDF [Tigrayan Defense Force, an armed group]. Around five

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “Syrian Army Accused of Targeting Older Women,” Human Rights Watch news release, March 3, 2020.

⁴⁶ “Ethiopia: Ethnic Tigrayans Forcibly Disappeared,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 18, 2021.

older people. The owner of Axum hotel [in Addis Ababa] was there; he is probably around 70 years old.⁴⁷

In Western Tigray, an administrative territory in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region, Amhara forces and militia groups arbitrarily detained in inhumane conditions, beat, and forcibly expelled older people, among others, from three towns in November 2021.⁴⁸ "Tigrayans, regardless of [their] sex and age, were taken to a school," said one man in Rawyan who witnessed the house-to-house roundups of Tigrayans by Fano militia. "They separated the old from the young, took their money and other possessions.... Older people and parents were loaded on big trucks [going] east. They let them go with nothing, while the young remained behind."⁴⁹

In South Sudan, government soldiers carried out extensive abuses against civilians during counterinsurgency operations between December 2018 and March 2019 in [the area then known as] Yei River state.⁵⁰ Government forces arrested and detained civilians, mainly men, on accusations of being rebels or rebel supporters or to force them to provide information about the rebels. Soldiers arrested Stephen Remo, a 38-year-old man from Ombasi village, during an operation in March, accused him of being a rebel, and took him to the main barracks in Yei, where a family member said he was detained with at least one man in his sixties.⁵¹

Since the start of the uprising in Syria in 2011, the Syrian government's notorious security agencies have arbitrarily detained many, including older people such as rights activist Hussein Essou and Khalil Maatouk, the then-executive director of the Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research and head of the Syrian Center for the Defense of Detainees.⁵² Non-state armed groups including extremist groups like ISIS also arbitrarily detained and disappeared older activists like long-time rights defender Abdullah Khalil and Father Paolo

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Ethiopia: New Wave of Atrocities in Western Tigray," Human Rights Watch news release, December 16, 2021.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ "South Sudan: Government Forces Abusing Civilians," Human Rights Watch news release, June 4, 2019.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Hussein Essou, Peaceful Activist," Human Rights Watch news release, September 11, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/09/11/hussein-essou-peaceful-activist>; and "Khalil Maatouk, Lawyer," Human Rights Watch news release, September 16, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/09/16/khalil-maatouk-lawyer>.

Dall'Oglio, an Italian Jesuit priest who was widely considered a respected activist and a prominent voice for peace and coexistence.⁵³

In a 2020 report on Northeast Nigeria, Amnesty International reported that the Nigerian military had arbitrarily detained a large number of older people, who faced heightened risks of death in military detention due to the grossly inhuman conditions.⁵⁴

Torture and Other Ill-Treatment

Human Rights Watch documented cases in which government forces subjected older people to severe abuse, including beating and kicking, hanging people in stress positions, breaking bones, and denying medical treatment, food, and water in detention. In some cases, this treatment amounted to torture and at times resulted in death.

During the 2020 six-week war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, as Azerbaijani forces took control of areas in and around the region, they rounded up local civilians.⁵⁵ Most younger civilians had fled the hostilities. Those remaining, with few exceptions, were older people. Arega Shakheldyan, 72, said she and her husband, Eduard, 79, remained in their home in the village of Avetaranots throughout the conflict. In late October, Azerbaijani forces entered the village and their home, threatened the couple with machine guns, and aggressively detained them.

Azerbaijani soldiers took them to an abandoned house in the village, and kept them overnight together with Sedrak, a neighbor in his 70s, and another villager in his 60s. The next day, soldiers held the detainees in a shed overnight. Arega said:

We spent all night in that shed, with no food, no water. It got cold, and I was shivering in my thin gown. My husband and Sedrak dozed off at some

⁵³ Human Rights Watch, *Kidnapped by ISIS: Failure to Uncover the Fate of Syria's Missing*.

⁵⁴ Amnesty International, *"My Heart Is in Pain": Older People's Experience of Conflict, Displacement, and Detention in Northeast Nigeria* (London: Amnesty International, 2019), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/AFR4433762020ENGLISH.pdf>, p. 5.

⁵⁵ Tanya Lokshina (Human Rights Watch), "Survivors of Unlawful Detention in Nagorno-Karabakh Speak Out about War Crimes."

point, but I couldn't sleep. I was too scared. I just sat there shivering and crying.⁵⁶

The next day, the soldiers took the detainees to a logging site in the mountains nearby, where one soldier punched Eduard several times and kicked him.

Azerbaijani forces then took them to a prison in Baku, Azerbaijan's capital, and placed Arega in a cell with another older Armenian woman. Officials refused to give Arega medication for her high blood pressure and did not allow her to see a doctor, despite her requests. In early December, officials told Arega that her husband had died in his sleep and took her to view his body. She told Human Rights Watch that her husband's face was black and blue. He suffered from asthma and may not have had access to medication. On his death certificate, issued by the Armenian authorities following an autopsy, the cause of death was listed as blunt brain injury, brain swelling, and acute disorder of vital brain function.⁵⁷

In Mali, Human Rights Watch interviewed 74 men, including some older men, who had been detained by Malian security forces in 2015 for their suspected support of or membership in Islamist armed groups in central and southern Mali.

One herder, 55, said he was hogtied and suspended for several hours with a rock on his back. He said, "I lost feeling for over two months; I couldn't go to the bathroom, feed myself or hold a cup of tea. I bled so much. It still hurts and you can see the scars for yourself."⁵⁸

A 60-year-old man accused of selling milk to the Islamists said his arm was broken after he was hogtied and driven over bad roads for over 12 hours. Cuts on both wrists, as observed by Human Rights Watch researchers, were clearly visible and his arm appeared injured.⁵⁹

Human Rights Watch also interviewed 26 people detained at the Nampala military camp in Mali's Ségou region who said they had suffered torture and other ill-treatment and

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ "Mali: Abuses Spread South," Human Rights Watch news release, February 19, 2016.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

witnessed severe mistreatment of others. A 60-year-old shepherd described his abusive interrogation:

They tied me and hung me upside down from 2 a.m. to 5 a.m. They asked where the jihadists [Islamist fighters] were; I said I only care about my animals. Then a soldier thrust his gun into my face with force. I lost half my teeth. There was so much blood in my mouth, I vomited. [...] Are the soldiers there to protect or terrorize us?⁶⁰

In South Sudan, in late December 2018 the government began a military offensive to flush out the National Salvation Front (NAS), an armed group, in various locations in Mukaya and Otego counties.⁶¹

“Mary,” from a village in Otego county, said that during the operation in early February, three government soldiers found her and her grandfather in their home, beat them, and forced them to carry looted property. She said:

They wanted me to carry goods for them, but my grandfather stopped them. They beat my grandfather [who is] in his 70s, first accusing him of being a rebel and then told him to carry a bucket of onions, flour, and cassavas to their barracks.... They hung them on his neck behind his back with a rope. When he collapsed under the weight, the soldiers kicked him and beat him with a rope and stick.⁶²

More than 28,000 photos of deaths in government custody were smuggled out of Syria and first came to public attention in January 2014. Human Rights Watch found that there was widespread torture, starvation, beatings, and disease in Syrian government detention facilities, often leading to detainees’ deaths.⁶³ Karem, a former detainee of the Syrian government’s Branch 235 of Military Intelligence (known as Palestine Branch), said that 83

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ “South Sudan: Government Forces Abusing Civilians,” Human Rights Watch news release, June 4, 2019.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Human Rights Watch, *If the Dead Could Speak: Mass Deaths and Torture in Syria’s Detention Facilities*.

people died in his cell during his nine months of detention in 2014. He described the death of an older prisoner suffering from severe diarrhea:

There was one older detainee, he was like an uncle to me and my brother. He would tell us that one day he would invite us to his house and that we would taste his wife’s cooking. He loved sweets—if we ever got any jam [with our meals], we would give it to him. He got diarrhea and shut down. He stopped eating and started defecating on himself. On the day of his death, in March [2014], the whole cell prayed for his soul.⁶⁴

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Human Rights Watch has documented the rape of older women during armed conflict.

The armed conflict that began in November 2020 in the Tigray region of Ethiopia and has since spread to neighboring Amhara and Afar regions has been characterized by human rights abuses, including widespread sexual violence, committed by Ethiopian, Eritrean, and regional Amhara military forces. Healthcare providers said the rape survivors they treated included older women between 65 and 80 years old.⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch independently reviewed information of four cases of sexual violence against women between the ages of 50 and 70 provided by the healthcare facilities and service providers that assisted the survivors directly.⁶⁶

Rape has been a consistent feature of South Sudan’s war, committed by all parties to the conflict.⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch heard of at least two rapes and an attempted rape during government operations between December 2018 and March 2019 in Yei River state. One of the survivors, a woman in her late 50s, said that a soldier made her carry looted property, beat her with a gun, and raped her:

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch, *“I Always Remember That Day”*: Access to Services for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence in Ethiopia’s Tigray Region.

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch interviews, unpublished document on file with Human Rights Watch, 2021.

⁶⁷ “South Sudan: Government Forces Abusing Civilians,” Human Rights Watch news release, June 4, 2019.

When we reached the riverside, he said put down the luggage. He started shooting around me and then hit me with his gun and said, “Mama lie down, I want to have sex with you.” I said, “Why would you do this? I am a born again Christian and you are like my son.” He beat me again and then forced himself on me.⁶⁸

Amnesty International spoke to women and girls abducted and raped by government forces or allied militias during attacks in Leer county, Unity State in South Sudan, between August 2015 and December 2015. Victims included older women who said that they felt a particular affront at being assaulted given their age.⁶⁹

In Mali, a group of five Islamist fighters raped four women in an isolated farmhouse in the central province of Mopti in 2015. The victims said that the fighters held the women, two of whom were older widows, overnight. A 25-year-old survivor said:

On our way from Bandiagara [village], armed men emerged from the bush, and forced us to stop.... [Some of them] forced us into the bush where they raped us.... Then, around dusk, they ordered us to walk to a house some distance away – it was terrifying; I thought they were going to leave us dead in the bush.

In that house were two older women, widows, whom they also raped. After raping us, they forced all of us to wash, pray, and say, “Allah hu akbar.” Then they made the women who were desperately poor kill and cook their only sheep. They didn’t tie us, but they had guns and had taken our phones. They said, “No one leaves, no one enters.” We were all inside, enclosed in the same room. ... they talked all night, and kept saying, “Allah hu akbar.” They left about 4 a.m.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Amnesty International, *We are still running: War Crimes in Leer, South Sudan* (London: Amnesty International, 2016), <https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/afr6544862016english.pdf>, p.27.

⁷⁰ “Mali: Abuses Spread South,” Human Rights Watch news release, February 19, 2016.

Abduction and Kidnapping

Armed groups have abducted and kidnapped older people, including in targeted attacks on community leaders.

In 2019, armed Islamist groups abducted or killed six community leaders from central Mali including village chiefs, mayors, and religious leaders (marabouts and imams). Community leaders who were not detained believed most of those abducted were later executed. In one case, Islamist fighters released an audio message of someone in their custody being tortured while his abductors interrogated him.

Witnesses and family members believe the armed Islamist groups targeted the men for several reasons: allegedly organizing self-defense groups; allegedly providing intelligence to the Malian or Burkinabè security services; or refusing to adhere to the Islamists' strict interpretation of Islamic tenets.

Because community leaders in the Sahel are often older men, the abduction of community leaders means that more older men will be affected.⁷¹ In Burkina Faso in 2020, armed Islamist groups abducted several local government officials and prominent elders, later killing some of them. In August 2020, the 73-year-old Grand Imam of Djibo, Sonibou Cisse, was executed several days after being taken off a public transport vehicle south of Djibo.⁷²

In Cameroon, amid intensifying violence and growing calls for secession of the North-West and South-West regions between September 2018 and March 2019, armed separatists assaulted and kidnapped dozens of people. In one case, a man in his 50s said separatist fighters kidnapped and held him for ransom days after the October presidential election, which the separatists opposed. He was taken to a remote camp operated by the Ambazonia Restoration Forces, one of the armed separatist groups operating in the Anglophone regions.⁷³

⁷¹ Edward McAllister and Lena Masri, "Extremists target African village leaders in wave of assassinations," *Reuters*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/africa-islamists-sahel-leaders/> (accessed October 27, 2021).

⁷² Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2021* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021), Burkina Faso chapter, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/burkina-faso>.

⁷³ "Cameroon: New Attacks on Civilians By Troops, Separatists," Human Rights Watch news release, March 28, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/28/cameroon-new-attacks-civilians-troops-separatists>.

Destruction, Looting of Civilian Property and Infrastructure

Human Rights Watch has documented the destruction and looting of civilians' property during armed conflicts, from their furniture and savings to their houses and businesses. Older people have described the devastation of losing everything they have spent their lives working towards, as well as the loss of family members and livelihoods. The looting and destruction of homes and property may have an increased effect on older people who may have been displaced more than once, get separated from the rest of their family, and who may find it more difficult to rebuild their lives than younger people.

Israeli airstrikes in May 2021 destroyed four high-rise buildings in Gaza City. The towers contained scores of businesses, offices of news agencies, and many homes. Jawad Mahdi, 68, an owner of one of those buildings, the al-Jalaa tower, who lived there with dozens of family members, said:

All these years of hard work, it was a place of living, safety, children, and grandchildren, all our history and life, destroyed in front of your eyes.... It's like someone ripping your heart out and throwing it.⁷⁴

In Cameroon, a 61-year-old man lived in the bush for three years after fleeing his village of Kake 2 in the South-West region in 2017. He said:

The BIR [Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide] soldiers were wearing dark uniforms with "BIR" written on their helmets. They broke into my house and looted it. They removed the zinc on the roof. They fired at the walls. I could see the signs of the bullets. They also destroyed the door. They stole my TV, radio, chairs, beds, and 300,000 CFA [US\$530]. I estimate the loss at 3 million CFA [US\$5,306] approximately. It has been a catastrophe for me. I was left with nothing. All my stuff, my property, my money. I am living from hand to mouth and from time to time I am forced to beg. This is humiliating.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ "Gaza: Israel's May Airstrikes on High-Rises," Human Rights Watch news release, August 23, 2021.

⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with a 61-year-old man, Kumba, Cameroon, unpublished document on file with Human Rights Watch, April 28, 2021.

A 67-year-old man said he fled Okoyong village in Cameroon in 2018 because of the frequent attacks and clashes between separatist fighters and the military:

I panicked at a minor sound, thinking it would be an attack. It was very difficult to stay, especially for an old man like me. As an older person, the biggest challenge I faced when fleeing was the fact that I didn't have enough money to support myself. I am facing a financial breakdown, and it's hard.⁷⁶

Human Rights Watch has also documented the unlawful destruction during armed conflicts of civilian infrastructure, which can be defined as the basic structures and facilities, such as hospitals, schools, and markets, that society needs to function. The 2019 UN Secretary-General's report on older people in emergencies found that older people are disproportionately affected by the disruption of health services and food security.⁷⁷

In April 2019, the Syrian government and its ally, Russia, launched dozens of air and ground attacks on civilian objects and infrastructure as part of a major military offensive to retake Idlib governorate and surrounding areas in northwest Syria— one of the last areas controlled by anti-government armed groups. They used cluster munitions, incendiary weapons, and improvised “barrel bombs” in populated areas to deadly effect. The attacks killed at least 1,600 civilians, and destroyed and damaged civilian infrastructure, and forced the displacement of an estimated 1.4 million people. On January 11, 2020, an attack struck an area in Idlib city close to the municipal football stadium. Video footage show wounded and dead people being taken to ambulances and people in a hospital, including children, an older woman, and a man with cuts to his face.⁷⁸

Older people in the community were not spared in these attacks, and those who remain in Idlib continue to suffer the consequences of the destroyed and damaged health infrastructure in the governorate. In 2019, the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition, made up of international nongovernmental organizations, reported 147 separate incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care in Syria, with over half occurring in Idlib

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ UN General Assembly, Follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons: Second World Assembly on Ageing, Report of the Secretary-General, A/74/170, July 15, 2019, paras. 31 and 32.

⁷⁸ Human Rights Watch, “*Targeting Life in Idlib*”: Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure.

governorate. The Syrian Network for Human Rights reported in May 2020 on at least 93 attacks in and around Idlib on healthcare facilities since April 2019.⁷⁹

Attacks on Internally Displaced Older People

In the Central African Republic between November 2014 and April 2015, Seleka forces killed 30 people when they went to look for firewood or work in fields nearby displacement camps in three villages. Janine Ndoko, 60, said that she and her husband, Pierre Touaga, also 60, encountered Seleka fighters when they left Batangafo camp to look for firewood in February 2015. She said:

We were just outside of town, near Daba. We were a little separated, each of us looking for wood. Through the bush I saw Seleka in uniform. I lied down and heard shots. I waited for a while before I moved to find his body. I just buried him there.⁸⁰

In Cameroon between August 1 and 2, 2020, the Islamist armed group Boko Haram used apparent child suicide bombers in an overnight attack on a site for displaced people in the town of Nguetechewe. There was no evident military objective in the vicinity. Interviewees said that fighters entered the site and began firing wildly at people who were desperately trying to flee. A 70-year-old man, who had been living at the site for over three years after fleeing violence in his home village of Talassari, said:

I was sleeping. Suddenly, I heard gunfire. I immediately left the house and saw numerous Boko Haram fighters outside. They were screaming: “Allahu Akbar!” They were shooting everywhere. As I ran away for my life, they shot me in the stomach. I found myself on the ground, an inexplicable pain striking my body. I was bleeding profusely, and I lost consciousness. When I woke up, I was [in a hospital].⁸¹

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Killing Without Consequence: War Crimes, Crimes Against Humanity and the Special Criminal Court in the Central African Republic*.

⁸¹ “Cameroon: Boko Haram Suicide Bombers Strike Displacement Site,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 25, 2020.

In 2017, the Russian-Syrian joint military operation carried out unlawful airstrikes that killed civilians trapped in northern Syria. The repeated attacks and the lack of escape routes highlighted the dangers facing civilians in the area and undermined any notion that Idlib could be considered safe for civilians. On September 29, aircraft attacked Armanaz, a town northwest of the city of Idlib, killing at least 35 people, according to witnesses and photos and video footage analyzed by Human Rights Watch. Yasser Yahya, a local resident, went to the area immediately after the attack. He said:

We went to rescue people and we found people all over the ground and under the rubble. Everyone was trying to rescue them.... Most people who died are women and children, there are also men, and also older people, some in wheelchairs – they couldn't go out of their homes.⁸²

Amnesty International reported in 2019 that in Myanmar, older people from the ethnic Kachin, Lisu, Rakhine, Rohingya, Shan, and Ta'ang communities faced the same patterns of military abuse as younger people. Many older women and men described being displaced by conflict and abuse repeatedly over the course of their lives, which had profound psychosocial and economic effects.⁸³

More than a year of fighting in 2019-20 between Myanmar military forces and the Arakan Army forced families to flee multiple times as villages were repeatedly shelled. “We didn't arrive in Sittwe [the Rakhine State capital] immediately,” Marlar, a 55-year-old teacher from Kyauktan village in Rathedaung township, told Human Rights Watch. She said that her family had initially fled to the town of Rathedaung but had not felt safe after hearing the sounds of fighting every day.⁸⁴

Lack of Access to Humanitarian Assistance, Health Care

Older people displaced by armed conflict may face particular barriers to accessing humanitarian assistance and health care. These include those who remain in conflict areas

⁸² “Russia/Syria: Deadly Airstrikes on Trapped Civilians,” Human Rights Watch news release, October 31, 2017.

⁸³ Amnesty International, *“Fleeing my whole life”: Older People’s Experience of Conflict and Displacement in Myanmar* (London: Amnesty International, 2019), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ASA1604462019ENGLISH.pdf>, pp. 7-8.

⁸⁴ “Myanmar: Civilians Caught in Surge of Fighting,” Human Rights Watch news release, March 4, 2020.

that have been subjected to attacks by explosive weapons with wide area effects that destroy and damage hospitals and other healthcare facilities as described above.⁸⁵

In South Sudan in 2017, older people encountered difficulties getting aid at displacement sites. Displaced older people who sought refuge in remote bush areas or on islands were more likely to encounter difficulties getting aid than those who found their way to the Protection of Civilian sites inside UN bases.⁸⁶

A 70-year-old man who was blind said aid was inaccessible on the island to which he was displaced. He said:

Life on the islands is hard. Some organizations have registered older people, but I never got registered because they did not come to this particular island. There's no health clinic either on the island. To get medical assistance, I must travel to another island or to the mainland.⁸⁷

Syrian refugees, including older people who returned to Syria between 2017 and 2021 from Lebanon, faced persecution and other grave human rights abuses from the Syrian government and affiliated militias. Some said they could not afford the health care they needed in Lebanon and returned in the hope of obtaining less expensive health care in Syria. UNHCR subsidizes the costs of basic medical care for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, but they rarely cover treatment for palliative care or chronic conditions. Layla, a 65-year-old woman who returned to Lebanon in 2019 after going back to Syria, said:

We went back then to Syria because...it was very hard to obtain all the things we needed here in Lebanon: we needed medical treatment, and the medicine [in Lebanon] is expensive.... I couldn't afford to have a separate house here in Lebanon and my son couldn't find a job, and the house is so small, I didn't want to be a burden on my son and his wife.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch, "*Targeting Life in Idlib*": *Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure*.

⁸⁶ "South Sudan: People with Disabilities, Older People Face Danger," Human Rights Watch news release, May 31, 2017.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Human Rights Watch, "*Our Lives Are Like Death*": *Syrian Refugee Returns from Lebanon and Jordan* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/10/20/our-lives-are-death/syrian-refugee-returns-lebanon-and-jordan>.

Maysa, a 76-year-old woman from Damascus Countryside, also explained how the cost of medication in Lebanon convinced her to go back to Syria:

The situation was very bad in Lebanon, my husband couldn't find work. The house rent was around US\$200 per month. At the time, that was 300,000 Lebanese pounds. The room rent was high, we don't have furniture or equipment. We couldn't afford medicine. So, my husband convinced me to go back to Syria.⁸⁹

Ukrainian government imposes obstacles to accessing pensions in conflict-affected areas

The armed conflict between Ukraine and Russia-backed armed groups in eastern Ukraine has been ongoing since early 2014. Later that year, the Ukrainian government stopped funding government services in the areas of eastern Ukraine controlled by armed groups. Since then, it has required older people from regions controlled by nongovernment forces to travel to government-controlled territory to receive their pensions. The government also requires them to register as internally displaced persons, to provide addresses in government-controlled areas, and to make the journey through Ukrainian crossing points at least once every 60 days. If they failed to register or cross, the authorities automatically stopped paying their pension.⁹⁰

In 2020, the Ukrainian parliament failed to pass legislation that would have addressed the link between pension eligibility and displaced persons' status on the premise that the state budget could not cover the cost of arrears owed to these pensioners.

This discriminatory policy has had a significant impact on older people. Many do not get their pension at all. Lyubov Toporkova, 85, and her sister, Raisa Ostapova, 81, live in Vuhlehirsk, a town in eastern Ukraine that is not currently controlled by the

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Laura Mills, "Money Slipped through My Fingers Like Water."

government. Both lost their pensions in 2014 because they could not obtain displaced person status.⁹¹ According to Ukraine’s ombudswoman, in 2019 over 450,000 of the 1.2 million pensioners living in these areas did not receive their pensions.⁹²

The trip can also be dangerous and physically demanding and takes a particular toll on older people.⁹³ Between January and early April 2019, according to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, at least 19 people died while crossing these checkpoints, mostly older people with heart-related complications.⁹⁴

In 2020, the Ukrainian government’s response to Covid-19 exacerbated an already dire situation. Prior to the pandemic, while the journey across the conflict line was sometimes arduous, most pensioners could cross, access their pensions at banking services frequently located within several hundred meters of the Ukrainian government checkpoint, and return in less than one day. Between March and August, the government-imposed travel restrictions on residents of nongovernment areas that largely prevented them from accessing their pensions and pushed them further into poverty. For over four months, pensioners had to cut back dramatically on food, medication, and necessary hygiene products.⁹⁵

“I shake from hunger when I walk,” said a 68-year-old woman who lives near Donetsk. “Before, I could buy sausage, a little bit of meat – now I can’t, there’s not enough money. I eat only soup and bread.”⁹⁶

Ukraine has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which guarantees the right to an adequate standard of living and social

⁹¹ “Ukraine: People with Limited Mobility Can’t Access Pensions,” Human Rights Watch news release, January 24, 2020.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ “Ukraine: Barriers to Free Movement for Older People,” Human Rights Watch news release, November 29, 2018.

⁹⁴ Laura Mills, “Money Slipped through My Fingers Like Water.”

⁹⁵ “Ukraine: Covid-19 Rules Blocked Access to Pensions,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 3, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/03/ukraine-covid-19-rules-blocked-access-pensions>.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

security in older age.⁹⁷ Additionally, Ukraine is a party to the European Convention on Human Rights and pension rights are protected property rights under article 1 of Protocol 1 of the convention.⁹⁸ Accordingly, any interference with pension rights must have a proper legal basis, pursue a legitimate aim, and must not be discriminatory or impose an excessive and disproportionate burden on individuals.

In August 2021, the authorities temporarily suspended the requirement for pensioners residing in nongovernment-controlled areas to regularly confirm displaced person registration and in September, announced plans to introduce remote identity verification.⁹⁹ If enacted, the latter step would help address discrimination against pensioners residing in nongovernment-controlled areas, in particular helping to eliminate barriers that pensioners who cannot travel due to limited mobility have faced in accessing their pensions since 2014.¹⁰⁰

As the government does not exercise control over parts of eastern Ukraine, it is within its authority to amend the process by which pensioners in areas it does not control can collect their pensions. However, the process the government has introduced treats pensioners in these areas differently from other pensioners and imposes an excessive burden that creates hardship for them and therefore falls outside the scope of permitted interferences. It is also unjustified in that it violates other rights, such as family and home life, protected under article 8 of the European Convention.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 49, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 U.N.T.S. 3, entered into force January 3, 1976, ratified by Ukraine on November 12, 1973, arts. 11 and 9.

⁹⁸ European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, ETS 5, 213 U.N.T.S. 222, entered into force September 3, 1953, as amended by Protocols Nos. 3, 5, and 8 which entered into force on September 21, 1970, December 20, 1971 and January 1, 1990 respectively, ratified by Ukraine on September 11, 1997; Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, ETS 9, 213 U.N.T.S. 262, entered into force May 18, 1954, ratified by Ukraine on September 11, 1997.

⁹⁹ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, “On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine Aimed at Preventing the Occurrence and Spread of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19),” October 10, 2021, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/530-20#Text> (accessed January 2, 2022); and Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine, “From Now On, [Temporarily Occupied Territories] TOT Residents Will Be Able to Undergo Remote Identification to Receive Pensions and Social Payments,” September 22, 2021, https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/vidteper-meshkanci-tot-zmozhut-prohoditi-viddalenu-identifikaciyu-dlya-otrimannya-pensij-ta-socviplat?fbclid=IwARoCioCfx7TdHRemF_k19845VlK3kz5NnBcoKoBkCZkL6THbVbfxZEr53aA (accessed January 13, 2022).

¹⁰⁰ “Ukraine: People with Limited Mobility Can’t Access Pensions,” Human Rights Watch news release, January 24, 2020.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Not Fleeing Hostilities

Older people can face heightened risk of injury and abuses when they do not or are unable to flee hostilities and violence. Human Rights Watch has documented older people who chose not to leave their homes and property when it was possible to do so and were killed or otherwise harmed by government or non-state armed forces when their communities came under attack. Others have suffered harm who were unable to flee because of limited mobility, disability, or because families could not support their flight.

The humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders, MSF) estimated that in Rakhine State in Myanmar, older ethnic Rohingya people died at disproportionately high rates during the first month of the military's campaign of mass atrocities from August 24 to September 25, 2017. MSF estimated a reported death rate of 5.47 percent for people 50 years old and above, compared to 1.70 percent for children under 5 years old and 1.95 percent for people between 5 and 49 years old. MSF estimated that 72 percent of all deaths during this period were a result of violence.¹⁰²

Choosing Not to Flee

Some older people chose not to flee their homes despite approaching hostilities because they wanted to protect their property, thought they would not be attacked, or had become ill when fleeing earlier fighting.

In the Central African Republic, fighters from the Central African Patriotic Movement (MPC) attacked the Batangafo displacement camp in Ouham province on July 29, 2017.¹⁰³ A resident of the town, "Pierre," ran to the displacement camp when the attack began. His brother, 57, refused to run as he wanted to stay and protect his belongings. "I watched the Seleka approach [my brother's] house from about 200 meters away," Pierre said. "They were Seleka from town, they were dressed in uniforms. I could see them asking [my

¹⁰² Médecins Sans Frontières, "Rohingya Crisis - A Summary of Findings from Six Pooled Surveys," December 9, 2017, <https://www.msf.org/myanmarbangladesh-rohingya-crisis-summary-findings-six-pooled-surveys> (accessed December 6, 2021).

¹⁰³ "Central African Republic: Civilians Targeted as Violence Surges," Human Rights Watch news release, October 27, 2017.

brother] for money, but he said he did not have any. So they shot him twice in the chest and searched him.”¹⁰⁴

In Nagorno-Karabakh during the six-week conflict in 2020 between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Arega Shakheldyan and her husband, Eduard, both in their 70s, remained at home in their village. Arega said that Eduard had refused to leave because he did not want to abandon their home and possessions and did not expect Azerbaijani forces to enter the village. In late October 2020, Azerbaijani soldiers found the Shakheldyans at home and detained them, together with two other older villagers, as described above.¹⁰⁵

In the Anglophone South-West region of Cameroon, Regina, a 75-year-old-blind woman, decided not to flee her village of Ekona when fighting between the military and armed separatists broke out in July 2019. Regina had fled fighting in October 2018 and caught typhoid from drinking dirty water in the forest. Since then, she decided that she would stay behind, including during fighting. The inaccessible terrain and lack of support placed Regina in danger, as fighting continued around her village. She said: “My family escaped to the bush, but I did not go. I survived alone with the little that was left in the house. It was very difficult. The worst consequence of this crisis is that I no longer appreciate life. I just wish to die so I can end my suffering. I prefer to stay in the house and just die there.”¹⁰⁶

In 2019, Amnesty International reported that in Myanmar, some older people from the ethnic Kachin, Lisu, Rakhine, Rohingya, Shan, and Ta’ang communities faced heightened risks when they did not flee a military advance, either due to limited mobility or a deep connection to their home and land. ¹⁰⁷

Obstacles to Flight

Family members may be unable to support older people, including older people with disabilities, to flee with them from villages, communities, or displacement camps during

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Tanya Lokshina (Human Rights Watch), “Survivors of Unlawful Detention in Nagorno-Karabakh Speak Out about War Crimes.”

¹⁰⁶ “Cameroon: Make Humanitarian Response More Inclusive,” Human Rights Watch news release, December 10, 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Amnesty International, “*Fleeing my whole life.*”: Older People’s Experience of Conflict and Displacement in Myanmar.”¹⁰⁸ Human Rights Watch, “*All of My Body Was Pain*”: Sexual Violence against Rohingya Women and Girls in Burma.

hostilities. Older people and their relatives also said that they have been unable to flee fighting because of their older age. Other older people said that their disability hindered their ability to flee. Human Rights Watch documented cases in which older people who were unable to flee experienced abuses, including being fired upon, deliberately burned alive, raped or tortured, or killed or injured by crossfire.

In 2017, some Rohingya who fled Myanmar security forces' atrocities in Rakhine State described witnessing the killings of their older relatives. They reported security forces pushing older people who could not flee back into burning houses.¹⁰⁸ "I saw them push my husband's uncle into the fire. I saw them push him back into the burning house," Hasina Begum said. "He is weak, maybe 80 years [old].... I think they wanted everyone to leave and those that could not leave they put into the fire."¹⁰⁹

On August 30, 2017, Myanmar security forces and armed ethnic Rakhine men approached Tula Toli village in Rakhine State and began to burn homes on its outskirts. As Rohingya villagers gathered at the beach, the security forces and armed Rakhine surrounded them and began shooting into the crowds, killing many. Some villagers swam across the fast-moving river to seek safety on the opposite bank. Those who could not swim, including older people, were trapped on the beach.¹¹⁰

Mohammed Zakaria, 51, swam across the river and watched soldiers kill people on the beach. "Some of the old people, they killed with their machetes," he said. Mohammed also said that soldiers killed 11 of his close relatives, including his father, Mauwlawi Ahamad Hussein, 90, and his mother, Aisha Khatoum, 73.¹¹¹

Shawfika, 24, whose husband, 23, and father, 60, were shot on the beach, described how six soldiers took her and four other women, including her mother and aunt, both in their 60s, and three children from the beach to a bamboo house. They beat the children to death, then raped all five women, beat them, and set the house on fire. "When I escaped

¹⁰⁸ Human Rights Watch, *"All of My Body Was Pain": Sexual Violence against Rohingya Women and Girls in Burma*.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Massacre by the River: Burmese Army Crimes against Humanity in Tula Toli*.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

from the house, all the houses in the area were on fire,” she said. “I could hear women screaming from some of the other houses. They could not escape from the fires.”¹¹²

In the Central African Republic on October 12, 2016, armed groups razed the l’Évêché camp for displaced people in Kaga-Bandoro, forcing thousands of people to flee.¹¹³ Survivors said that at least three older people with disabilities could not flee on their own and family members were unable to assist their flight. A relative of Gilbert Bingimale, an older man with a physical disability, said that the family had to leave Bingimale in their hut so they could save the children. “It was burned down, and when we came back later we found him still there,” the relative said. “He must have hidden thinking he would be safe. All his skin had burned off.” A relative of Pauline Pharama, a 70-year-old blind woman, said he wanted to help Pharama flee, but could not reach her once the fighting started. He said he returned the next morning and found her body charred and eaten by dogs.¹¹⁴

In 2017, when fighters from the Central African Patriotic Movement (MPC) attacked the Batangafo displacement camp in Ouham province, a niece of 62-year-old Robert Kangabe, the chief of Zibobaga neighborhood, said that when the armed group came, everyone ran. Her uncle walked with a cane and could not run. She said:

I stayed with him because we thought the Seleka would not kill him, because he is old and cannot really move. The Seleka broke down the door, entered our house and searched for money. As they did, one of the fighters pulled my uncle up and walked him outside. My uncle said, “I am not anti-balaka, I can’t be, I am the chief of the quartier.” But they told him to walk away. He started to walk slowly and they shot him twice in the back.¹¹⁵

In the armed conflict in Tigray in Ethiopia in 2020-2021, a humanitarian organization reported that it had documented cases of older people being left behind during fighting because they were unable to flee and hide along with their family members.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ “Central African Republic: People with Disabilities at High Risk,” Human Rights Watch news release, June 21, 2017.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ “Central African Republic: Civilians Targeted as Violence Surges,” Human Rights Watch news release, October 27, 2017.

¹¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, *“I Always Remember That Day”: Access to Services for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence in Ethiopia’s Tigray Region.*

Throughout the crisis in Anglophone regions of Cameroon, some older people have been unable to flee violence while others have fled to safety.¹¹⁷ In 2019, Cusmas, a 65-year-old blind man from a village in the South-West region, who lived with his wife and daughters, said that when fighting occurs in his village, his family has repeatedly faced the difficult choice of whether to help him at risk to their own lives or flee without him. One of Cusmas' daughters said:

Whenever there is shooting, what comes first in my mind is my father. This is because we cannot do anything but lock him alone in the house since we cannot carry him. I am always frightened whenever we are in the bush thinking that, when we come back home, we could find my father dead.¹¹⁸

Accessing necessities, such as food and the latrine, is difficult for Cusmas when he is left alone. As a result, he is afraid and anxious, but as Cusmas said:

The worst of all my worries is that I always feel that the military will one day burn me in the house alive. Before this crisis, I had challenges in moving and accessing services, but I didn't have any fear. Now I am constantly afraid, and I tell my children that they should be ready to face the worst at any time.¹¹⁹

Between January and August 2021, Islamist armed groups killed over 420 civilians and drove tens of thousands from their homes during attacks in western Niger. An older man described one attack that took place while he was attending a funeral in the village of Gairorou:

Our prayers were broken by the buzzing of motorcycles. The jihadists. Seeing them – heavily armed with AKs [assault rifles], RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] and bandoliers – we took off running, but 12 of us were stuck.... Many of us were older and couldn't run fast enough.... Without wasting time, they yelled, "Lie down, now!" and counted, ... "one, two,

¹¹⁷ "Cameroon: Make Humanitarian Response More Inclusive," Human Rights Watch news release, December 10, 2019.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

three ...” until reaching 12. Then they opened fire. One jihadist started walking around, checking to make sure we were dead. I was hit twice, but another man fell on top of me, dead. When our army fired a few mortar rounds, the jihadists panicked and sped off toward the Mali border.¹²⁰

In 2019, alleged armed ethnic Dogon groups attacked Peuhl communities in Mali. On February 16, 2019, Dogon militia attacked the village of Minima Maoude-Peuhl in southern Mali, killing six villagers including older men. A witness to the attack said: “I found two bodies about 200 meters from the village, along the path...Amadou, 85-years-old, was the eldest man of our village – it seemed he was shot in the head; and Allaye, around 67.... They were too old to run.”¹²¹

In November, armed Dogon men attacked another village, killing at least 16. A villager who participated in the burials provided a list of the dead, and recalled:

We found the bodies of our people near the mosque, in their fields, in their homes and in the bush. Eleven were older people who couldn’t run. Boucary Moussa, 84, was killed and thrown into a village well. Fatoumata Diagayeté, 80, was burned in her home.¹²²

In South Sudan, a displaced older woman described government and militia attacks on the village where she lived in Mayendit county, saying that no civilians were off limits in the attacks. She said:

The first time the government soldiers and militias came to my village in 2015, the old men and women who could not run were killed. There was Gatpan Mut, for example, who was a little old, and Gatkui Jich, who couldn’t move, and many, many more whose names I can’t remember.¹²³

¹²⁰ “Niger: Surging Atrocities by Armed Islamist Groups,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 11, 2021.

¹²¹ Human Rights Watch, *“How Much More Blood Must Be Spilled?”: Atrocities Against Civilians in Central Mali, 2019* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2020), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/malio220_web.pdf.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ “South Sudan: People with Disabilities, Older People Face Danger,” Human Rights Watch news release, May 31, 2017.

In the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, Human Rights Watch and others have documented scores of attacks on education, including students, teachers, and schools, by separatist fighters between 2017 and 2021. Due to their age, older teachers had greater difficulty fleeing and living in the bush for weeks to months at a time. A 60-year-old former teacher said he ran away from a village in the South-West region, following fighting between soldiers and separatist fighters in February 2018. He said: “There was indiscriminate shooting. Bullets were flying. Rounds of bullets. It was like being in a warzone. Everyone ran away. Running away during the attack was a shock for me. I am old and I cannot run as fast as young people.”¹²⁴

In Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique in 2020-2021, Amnesty International found that older women and men had been particularly affected when they had been unable to flee the fighting between an Islamist armed group and government forces, with some being burned to death in their homes and shot and killed or injured from indiscriminate fire.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Human Rights Watch, *“They Are Destroying Our Future”: Armed Separatist Attacks on Students, Teachers, and Schools in Cameroon’s Anglophone Regions* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/12/16/they-are-destroying-our-future/armed-separatist-attacks-students-teachers-and>.

¹²⁵ Amnesty International, *“What I Saw is Death”: War Cries in Mozambique’s Forgotten Cape* (London: Amnesty International, 2021), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/AFR4135452021ENGLISH.pdf>, p. 6.

International Legal Standards

All parties to armed conflict are bound by international humanitarian law, or the laws of war. The laws of war, found in the 1949 Geneva Conventions and its additional protocols and other treaties, as well as in customary laws of war, prohibit attacks on civilians and civilian property and the mistreatment of anyone in custody.

Persons responsible for serious violations of the laws of war committed with criminal intent may be prosecuted for war crimes. These include deliberate attacks on civilians, summary executions, torture and other mistreatment, and sexual violence.

The Geneva Conventions and customary international law recognize protections of older persons as civilians during both international and non-international armed conflicts. The Third Geneva Convention addresses the regard due prisoners of war because of their age.¹²⁶ The Fourth Geneva Convention affords protection to civilians, including civilians who are older, during international armed conflict, including in occupied territory.¹²⁷ Article 17 of the Fourth Geneva Convention provides for the safe removal of older civilians, among others, from besieged or encircled areas.¹²⁸ Article 85 provides that interned civilians, on the basis of age among other factors, have suitable accommodations.¹²⁹

While international humanitarian law applies only during armed conflicts, international human rights law applies at all times. Older people remain protected by applicable international human rights treaties, notably the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, among others.¹³⁰ Regional human rights treaties may also be applicable.¹³¹

¹²⁶ Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, adopted August 12, 1949, 75 U.N.T.S. 135, entered into force October 21, 1950, arts. 16, 44, 45, and 49.

¹²⁷ Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, adopted August 12, 1949, 75 U.N.T.S. 287, entered into force October 21, 1950, arts. 17 and 27.

¹²⁸ Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. Geneva, 12 August 1949, art. 17.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, art. 85.

¹³⁰ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 49, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 U.N.T.S. 3, entered into force January 3, 1976.

¹³¹ For example, the Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons, adopted June 15, 2015, entered into force January 11, 2017, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, entered into force December 1,

Of particular significance is the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Article 11 on situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies obligates states to take “all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities.”¹³² This applies to older people with disabilities including in situations of armed conflict, requiring states parties to pay extra attention to, and positively accommodate, the difference of disability in established norms on protection in armed conflict.¹³³

2009, art. 25, and the European Social Charter (Revised), ETS No.163, adopted April 3, 1996, art. 23. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Older Persons was adopted on January 31, 2016, but has not yet entered into force.

¹³² UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted December 13, 2006, G.A. Res. 61/106, Annex I, UN GAOR, 61st Sess., Supp. (No. 49) at 65, UN Doc. A/61/49 (2006), entered into force May 3, 2008, art. 11.

¹³³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, Gerard Quinn, A/76/146, July 19, 2021, <https://undocs.org/en/a/76/146> (accessed January 2, 2022), para. 23.

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No One Is Spared

Abuses Against Older People in Armed Conflict

Government forces and non-state armed groups have committed serious abuses against older civilians in conflicts around the world, including unlawful killing, summary executions, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and other ill-treatment, rape, abduction and kidnapping, and destruction of homes and property. In some circumstances older people face heightened risk related to their age. Displaced older people have experienced abuse and barriers to humanitarian assistance.

No One Is Spared describes patterns of abuses documented by Human Rights Watch between 2013 and 2021 against older people affected by armed conflict in Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and the ethnic-Armenian majority enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. It also draws on the situation of serious protracted violence in two English-speaking regions of Cameroon, Myanmar security force atrocities against older ethnic Rohingya in Rakhine State, and the experiences of older refugees in Lebanon displaced by conflict in Syria.

Older people are protected by international humanitarian law and human rights law. Human Rights Watch calls on all parties to conflict to abide by international law, including by ending abuses against older people. The United Nations Security Council, the UN Human Rights Council, UN and other peacekeeping missions, relevant UN agencies, donor governments, and humanitarian agencies should recognize and enhance protection of older people in armed conflict in their work.

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Woman, 67, at her home destroyed by airstrikes during the fighting for the ISIS-controlled city of Raqqa, Syria, 2018.

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