

Ghana Police News

Vigilante groups fill security vacuum 23 June 2008 (IRIN) - A militia group wielding knives, clubs, machetes and rocks known as the "Arakan Barracks Boys" has gained notoriety in the Ghanaian capital Accra, not as a threat to the peace, but as a defender of it. "I am grateful for their presence," said 68 year old Daniel Awah, an Accra resident, "they put the fear of God into all the criminals in the area." There has been a dramatic drop in criminal activities in the area since the group started patrolling five years ago. The Arakan group is just one of many locally organised militias operating in the capital. The informal groups are mostly made up of unemployed young men aged between 20 and 35 who target suspected thieves and criminals.

Figures do not exist on how many groups there are but a 2007 report sponsored by Ghana's Ministries of Interior and National Security acknowledged there were more than a thousand cases of vigilante-style justice recorded countrywide last year alone. "The township is a no-go zone for thieves and robbers," said Emmanuel "Jafa" Ashong, leader of the Arakan group, which mostly patrols in the Adabraka area of central Accra. "We will hit and kill with anything we can find and burn you...we will not take you to the police, we don't trust them or the courts," he said. Analysts say vigilante groups have grown out of public mistrust of the police and the criminal justice system. "When the state appears not to be present and is seen as being incapable of protecting people there is a vacuum that is created and it is this vacuum that is taken over by these vigilante groups," said Emmanuel Bombandey, the Executive Director of the West African Network for Peace Building (WANEP). While the groups have a positive image in areas where crime goes down, their "instant justice" tactics have terrorised innocent people. The beating to death of the administrator of the government hospital in the Bono Ahafo Region of Ghana by a group of young men last year who mistook him for a serial killer is one of the most notorious examples of mob law gone wrong. The Head of Public Relations at the police headquarters, assistant commissioner of police Kwesi Ofori acknowledged the police force has credibility problems. "We have challenges but we are working on it," he said, pointing to short staffing as one of the main constraints. Ofori said revamping the police force is only half the battle. The court system also needs to be streamlined. "It creates a bad image for us [police] when we arrest people and process them for court and it takes forever to reach a conviction," he said. There are no exact figures but Ghana's judicial service say several thousands of unheard cases across the country are pending before the courts. Some of these cases [have been pending for as long as five years](#). The government of Ghana recently signed a US\$12.5 million financing agreement with the European Commission to invest in the police and Ofori said the service will be embarking on a massive recruitment drive to improve the number of cops on the beat. Ghana's judicial service has also rolled out ambitious judicial reforms including court automation, building more law courts, appointing more judges and compulsory weekend courts to speed up the pace of justice. Bombandey of WANEP warned that the reforms must happen quickly and must show themselves to be effective if the vigilante groups are to be curbed. "Vigilante groups start off with altruistic aims but often end up becoming dangerous perpetrators of violent crimes themselves," he warned.