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Sierra Leone Government urged to implement the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

Joint statement by Amnesty International, WITNESS, Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), Conflict Management and Development Associates (CMDA), Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CDHR) and the Sierra Leone Bar Association

Tuesday 29 November 2005 marks the beginning of the fourth Consultative Group (CG) meeting on Sierra Leone. The two-day forum in London is being jointly hosted by the Government of Sierra Leone, the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the United Nations and the World Bank.

The CG meeting brings together key stakeholders, including civil society and the international donor community, to discuss a range of governance and development issues affecting Sierra Leone's future. Its main objective is the implementation of the new Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) adopted in March 2005, with a focus on reducing poverty through economic and social reform.

Amnesty International, WITNESS, Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), Conflict Management and Development Associates (CMDA), Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CDHR) and the Sierra Leone Bar Association wish to use the occasion of the CG meeting to highlight issues of mutual and urgent concern around the Government's lack of progress in implementing the recommendations of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

The Sierra Leone Government should place special emphasis on strengthening the protection of human rights, guaranteeing the independence of anti-corruption prosecutions and prioritising the rights of Sierra Leone's women.

The members of the CG meeting should pay particular attention to the TRC recommendations on human rights, such as the abolition of the death penalty, for repeal of the laws which allow criminal prosecution of libel cases, and the release of political prisoners from state custody. Moreover there should be a strong, concerted effort to enshrine the rights of Sierra Leone's women, whose continued inferior status hampers their access to basic services and holds back the country's development.

The TRC recommendations are contained in the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which was presented to Sierra Leone's President, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, in October 2004. The Sierra Leone Government is required by the TRC Act 2000 to implement the TRC recommendations in a "faithful" and "timely" manner. Yet more than one year after receiving the report, the Government has shown little sign of commitment to its legal obligations.

Civil society groups have been working with the Government under the auspices of the TRC Follow-Up Project. Initiatives have included the presentation of the TRC report and recommendations to a Special Session of the Sierra Leone Parliament on 14 November 2005. However the Government should take the lead in implementing the TRC recommendations and demonstrate its commitment to human rights and the rule of law. Its only position paper on the issue, the "White Paper" of June 2005, failed to meet the expectations of civil society and passed over many important recommendations without comment.

"The stakes are high in Sierra Leone, because the TRC recommendations are designed primarily to address the underlying causes of conflict that are still present in society today," says Gavin Simpson, the Freetown-based consultant for WITNESS, who co-ordinates the TRC Follow-Up Project. "The government has a wonderful opportunity to implement these recommendations and set Sierra Leone on the path to a more peaceful, prosperous and progressive future. But if it lapses in its obligations, then the ultimate consequence could be another war just around the corner."

Meanwhile, women in Sierra Leone, who constitute more than half of the population, are ranked last on the world gender development index and are severely impacted by structural discrimination both in law and in custom. Kolawole Olaniyan of Amnesty International states that "The CG meeting provides a platform for the Government to declare its commitment to putting the rights of women high on its development agenda".

The PRSP recognises the importance of empowering women at household and national levels as a means of reducing poverty. The PRSP states: "the focus needs to be on gender equality and empowerment as well as promotion and protection of the human rights of women in the process of achieving poverty reduction and sustainable economic growth. Additionally strategies will focus on establishing a legal framework to address gender-based violence, increasing women's participation in decision-making and reducing the exposure of women and the girl-child in particular to sexual exploitation and abuse".

The TRC recommendations call for the repeal of all statutory and customary laws that discriminate against women. In the sphere of political representation, the TRC recommends new laws requiring all political parties to ensure that at least 30% of their candidates for all national and local elections are women.

The current draft laws on marriage, succession, sexual offences and inheritance, soon to be presented by the Law Officer's Department, are a step in the right direction. However these laws must be passed into law immediately by Parliament and there must be a clear commitment from Government to their timely implementation. The TRC also recommends that Sierra Leone ratify the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women, which entered into force on the 25 November 2005. This action should be taken without delay.

Amnesty International, WITNESS, CGG, CMDA, CDHR and the Sierra Leone Bar Association urge all the participants in the CG meeting to scrutinise the level of progress made by the Sierra Leone Government in implementing the TRC recommendations. Such scrutiny is required in holding the Government to account on its PRSP undertakings to build a modern democratic society based on gender equality and on values such as tolerance, human dignity and respect for the rights of all persons.