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## **Guinea and Sierra Leone border: Fighting continues to endanger civilian lives**

Amnesty International today expressed concern about reports that civilians in Sierra Leone are being killed and injured in unlawful attacks as fighting continues along the border with Guinea.

"While efforts are being made to end conflict in Sierra Leone and resolve growing tensions between Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, little attention is being focused on the plight of Sierra Leonean civilians caught up in fighting along the border," the organization said.

In the last two weeks military activity by Guinean security forces is reported to have affected the towns of Kassiri and Rokupr and the villages of Kychom, Rokon and Sino, all in Kambia District in western Sierra Leone.

"Guinean security forces have launched indiscriminate attacks on Sierra Leone territory; little or no effort has been made to minimize the risk to civilian lives and property," Amnesty International said.

Although RUF forces are present in areas attacked by Guinean security forces, artillery and helicopter gun-ship attacks do not appear to have targeted RUF bases with any degree of care and accuracy. Witnesses of some attacks confirm that, while civilians suffered greatly, there were few RUF casualties or damage to its bases or equipment. Victims of the attack on Rokupr on 20 April seen in Port Loko hospital included a seven-year-old boy with severe shrapnel wounds, which medical staff feared would lead to amputation of his leg.

"International humanitarian law is being consistently violated but there appears to be reluctance by the Sierra Leone government and other members of the international community to condemn unambiguously these breaches of the Geneva Conventions, and Additional Protocol I, to which Guinea is a party."

"Civilians are also at risk from the Sierra Leone armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF) which has carried out deliberate and arbitrary killings and abductions and destroyed homes," the organization added.

During a visit to Sierra Leone last month, Amnesty International delegates met a number of people who had fled Kambia District to escape violence from both sides. Many are now in the villages of Barbara, Barlo Wharf and Konakridee.

One of them, a man from the town of Kambia, described shelling by Guinean security forces around 26 March during which a woman and her three children, all aged under 12 years, were

killed in their home. A woman from Kagbungbaw recounted the killing of her husband by the RUF on 14 March and also how Guinean security forces had shelled the village.

A woman from Mayogbor who had reached Barbara around 14 March after three days in the bush described how RUF forces came to the village, gathered the villagers together, saying that they would kill everyone. They demanded that rice supplies be handed over and forced 16 people - 10 men and six women - to carry the rice to Kassiri. All 10 men were subsequently killed; the women managed to escape.

The Guinean government is obliged under international law to ensure that its security forces make every effort to limit the impact of military operations on the civilian population, and the Sierra Leone government should insist that the safety of its citizens be paramount, Amnesty International said. The RUF must also end abuses, including killings and abductions of civilians, in areas affected by fighting.

The international community should bring pressure to bear on Guinea and the RUF to ensure that combatants respect international humanitarian law at all times, the organization added.

While in Sierra Leone, Amnesty International raised its concerns about the safety of civilians in areas close to the border with Guinea, particularly in Kambia District, with the government, the Guinean Ambassador to Sierra Leone and officials of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). The organization urged that immediate and effective measures be taken to protect civilian lives and property and that the rights of internally displaced people be respected.

Amnesty International also urged the government, UNAMSIL and the diplomatic community to place respect and protection of human rights prominently in all contact and dialogue with the RUF, including during UNAMSIL meetings with RUF leaders and broader meetings to resolve the conflict in Sierra Leone, such as this week's meeting in Abuja, Nigeria, of representatives of the government, the RUF, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity.

### **Background information**

Hostilities along the borders of Guinea and Sierra Leone which began in September 2000 have since intensified. In response to RUF attacks across the border, Guinean security forces - both ground troops and in helicopter gun-ships - have attacked suspected RUF positions, particularly in Kambia District but also in other parts of northern Sierra Leone which remain under rebel control.

There have been dozens of civilian deaths and injuries and extensive destruction of homes. Some towns and villages, for example Kassiri and Kychom, have been repeatedly taken and retaken by opposing forces. In some cases villages have been completely destroyed and are now deserted, adding to an already very large number of internally displaced people in Sierra Leone.  
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