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Public Statement

Guinea: Amnesty International calls for the protection of asylum seekers from Sierra Leone.

Amnesty International is concerned about reports that the Guinean Government has forcibly returned some 200 refugees to Sierra Leone without having evaluated their applications for protection, and is calling on the Guinean authorities to ensure that they do not reject refugees at their borders.

On 5 January a boat carrying some 200 people from Sierra Leone was prevented from docking in Guinea, apparently for "security reasons", and the boat returned to Sierra Leone.

This is the first report of refugees trying to flee the conflict in Sierra Leone being refused the right to seek asylum in Guinea and being forcibly returned (refouled). "Refugees from Sierra Leone may in the coming days face similar threats to their basic human rights", Amnesty International said today.

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) specifies in Article 2(3) of its Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, to which Guinea is a party, that "No person shall be subjected by a

Member State to measures such as rejection at the frontier, return or expulsion, which would compel him to return to or remain in a territory where his life, physical integrity or liberty would be threatened...”

Amnesty International says that it is essential that people who have a well-founded fear of being persecuted, are not *refouled* to their country before their cases have been individually evaluated. All countries must respect the principle of *non refoulement*, which includes non rejection at the frontier and not returning people to a country where they would be at risk of serious human rights abuses. The organization is therefore calling upon nearby states to allow refugees from Sierra Leone entry at their borders and give them the opportunity to a fair and impartial hearing.

In the past two weeks forces of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and the armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF) advanced towards the capital and today entered Freetown, where the democratically-elected government of Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was returned to power in March 1998.

Although security had earlier returned to the capital and much of the south of the country, the scale of human rights abuses committed by AFRC and RUF forces in the north and east of the country has escalated and taken on grotesque forms.

From April 1998 reports emerged of civilians suffering mutilations such as crude amputations of their feet, hands, arms, lips or ears. Women and girls have been systematically raped. Hundreds of civilians, in particular children and young men and women, have been abducted. This violence has resulted in hundreds of thousands of Sierra Leoneans fleeing to neighbouring Guinea and Liberia or becoming internally displaced within Sierra Leone.

Recent fighting has resulted in large movements of population towards the capital which had previously been a safe haven. However, with the advance of AFRC and RUF forces, many have started to flee for their safety, mostly to neighbouring Guinea.

"The refugees should be admitted to seek asylum without any discrimination on grounds of their political opinion, nationality or country of origin. It is a fundamental right," Amnesty International said.

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