

Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone

UN Security Council meeting on the countries of the Mano River Union Observations by Amnesty International

Thank you, Ambassador, on behalf of Amnesty International, for this chance to address the Council on the countries of the Mano River Union. Our focus is primarily on Liberia. Since the last Arria meeting in October, the situation has deteriorated significantly due to intensive fighting between Liberian government forces and forces from Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). This may threaten the stability of the sub-region, and could undermine the major achievements of the local population and the UN in Sierra Leone, from where my colleague here has just returned.

We therefore appreciate that the Council, on 15 May, expressed serious concern about the grave humanitarian situation in Liberia, the further displacement of the population and, notably, about increased human rights violations. Unfortunately, although President Taylor promised not to curtail civil liberties when he imposed a state of emergency in February, this is precisely what has happened. Last week, the Secretary-General also expressed grave concern about the precarious situation of large numbers of civilians. Indeed, according to our information, civilians are now being targeted at an alarming rate and have become victims of grave human rights abuses by Liberian government troops as well as the LURD. Human rights defenders and the national press are intimidated. A lack of independent monitoring and reporting on the grave human rights situation is the result.

The government is using the state of emergency, imposed in February, as a cover to arbitrarily detain persons labelled 'dissidents', to forcibly recruit young men including boys into the armed forces, and to curb freedom of expression. In April the government banned all political activity, including public meetings, under the state of emergency. Since its imposition, hundreds of young men have been arbitrarily arrested by Liberian security forces in camps for the internally displaced in Monrovia and elsewhere in the search for members of the LURD or other "dissidents". Many were subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and dozens have died as a result. Often those arrested were taken to the Executive Mansion, the Office of the Presidency in Monrovia, where many were tortured.

The Special Rapporteur on Torture noted in his latest report to the Commission on Human Rights that no institutions for the protection and promotion of human rights have been established in Liberia and that there is no training in human rights standards for any of the special security units that are said to regularly torture detainees. The Liberian Human Rights Commission - which should monitor and report on human rights abuses - has not been operational. All this reinforces the pertinent observations of the Inter-Agency Mission to West Africa in April last year that the absence of institutional measures to address truth and justice was a major handicap in Liberia's transition to democracy and the rule of law (S/2001/434).

The imposition of the state of emergency has led to further curbs on freedom of expression and actions against those who dare to express dissent. The Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression has described that radio stations were closed after broadcasting programmes critical of the government. He said that dozens of journalists were arrested for voicing critical views. The

human rights lawyer Tiawon Gongloe, arrested on 24 April, after giving a speech perceived to be critical of the government, was beaten so badly after arrest that he had to be hospitalized. He was released but is prevented from leaving the country. The Liberian independent paper - *The Analyst* - which printed his speech was promptly closed down on the day of his arrest and its news-editor received a death threat from the police as recently as 13 May.

Many human rights abuses have also been committed by LURD and other armed groups. Abuses include unlawful killings, torture including rape, and the recruitment of children as combatants by LURD.

The intensified fighting has also led to further displacement of large parts of the population and alarmingly high numbers of refugees fleeing Liberia. There are at least 40,000 internally displaced. They are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Many live in the northern parts near the borders with Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea (a country where the security forces persistently resort to excessive use of force with complete impunity). Many of those fleeing complain that their property has been looted by Liberian security forces as well as LURD. Women and girls say they were raped by the security forces. Some were subjected to gang rape. Many others have crossed the border. Four thousand refugees have crossed the border to Guinea during the last week alone and up to 10,000 are expected to join them escaping the fighting from Gbarnga, Bong County. Several hundred refugees have crossed into Côte d'Ivoire, 2,000 more have sought refuge in Ghana and 3,000 others are trying to cross into Sierra Leone. These figures demonstrate the seriousness of the crisis.

The fighting in Liberia also threatens to destabilize the situation in Sierra Leone, where peaceful elections have just been held. Respect for the rule of law must be firmly entrenched if human rights are to be effectively protected in the long term. A key issue is impunity. The Special Court for Sierra Leone and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are both extremely important institutions, which deserve the full support of the international community. However, equally important is the rebuilding of the national justice system. The UN and foreign donors must make a long term commitment to the re-establishment of national institutions for the protection of the rule of law, including the police, prisons and the judiciary. Without this, much of the progress achieved to date in Sierra Leone may be undone, which in turn would have serious repercussions for peace and security in the sub-region.

Of regional concern is the trade in rough diamonds and the easy availability of small arms, which have fuelled the conflict. The trade in diamonds from Liberia is subject to a Security Council sanctions regime. Although very few diamonds are in fact mined in Liberia itself, the government has reportedly used profits from the rough diamond trade with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to obtain arms, a practice which contributes to human rights abuses that are committed in the country. There must be effective and transparent controls of the diamond industry in the region to ensure long term respect for the rule of law and human rights in the sub-region. Efforts to strengthen the latter, we suggest, should guide all Security Council action in the sub-region.

Amnesty International asks the Security Council to:

- give a strong signal to the Secretary-General that the human rights mandate of the United Nations Peace-building Support Office (UNOL) in Liberia should be activated and substantively strengthened. There should be sufficient numbers of monitors to cover the whole country including the situation at the borders. Human rights monitors should have among them gender expertise, should have a strong mandate to engage in active verification including raising specific cases with the authorities and, where possible, with armed groups. Their regular, detailed reports should assist the Council's authoritative

decision making at this critical time. Effective monitoring should also help prevent abuses and help create conditions for free and fair elections due next year. UNOL's peace building activities should include training police and judicial authorities in observing international standards of human rights and humanitarian law and strengthening civil society actors;

- continue to press upon the government and armed opposition groups the need to halt human rights abuses, including unlawful killings, torture including rape and the forcible recruitment of young men and children as combatants to protect human rights and observe standards of international humanitarian law;
- help ensure that refugees and internally displaced people are effectively protected from human rights abuses, receive adequate support from the UN, and are allowed to move to safe areas in their own or another country without harassment by any security forces;
- urge the Liberian government to establish an effective and transparent system to control mining, trade and exports of rough diamonds. Monitoring and verification of all aspects of the trade by independent experts must be an essential element of that system;
- urge donors to provide substantive and long term support to rebuilding Sierra Leone's national institutions for the protection of the rule of law.