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LESOTHO: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON GOVERNMENT AND SECURITY FORCES TO RESPECT HUMAN RIGHTS

On the first anniversary of the restoration of civilian government in Lesotho -- and in the lead up to the long-awaited "national dialogue" on 17 September -- Amnesty International is appealing to the government and the security forces to cooperate in ensuring full respect for human rights in the country.

"The continuing tensions between the civilian government and the armed forces has left the country's citizens vulnerable to human rights violations and without effective means of redress," Amnesty International said today. "Unless the perpetrators of these violations are held accountable for their actions, violations will continue."

Serious human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, incommunicado detentions, sometimes in secret places, allegations of ill-treatment and torture, and deaths in custody as well as deaths resulting from the use of unjustified, lethal force by the security forces have taken place during the past year apparently without government sanction. The perpetrators have not been brought to justice. Among the victims have been government officials, a senior security police officer, members of parliament, alleged former members of the Lesotho Liberation Army, trade unionists, campaigners for human rights, and ordinary citizens.

Despite last year's intervention by the Presidents of Zimbabwe, South Africa and Botswana -- which helped restore the overthrown government of Ntsu Mokhele -- unresolved political tensions and a situation of fear and suspicion continue to undermine the rule of law, according to Amnesty International, whose delegates visited the country in June this year. While the human rights organization takes no position on the political differences which may underlie these ongoing tensions, it is gravely concerned by their consequences for human rights.

In letters to government ministers and to senior officers of the National Security Service and the Royal Lesotho Mounted Police, Amnesty International has expressed concern about these violations, as well as the absence of effective investigations and any justice for the victims.

The human rights organization is calling on the responsible authorities to take urgent steps to ensure, in accordance with the country's treaty obligations, that:

- the security forces are made fully accountable for their treatment of persons taken into custody and for their use of force and firearms;
- that violations are swiftly investigated under the supervision of independent judicial officers;
- that the perpetrators are brought to justice and the victims compensated;

- that provisions in the Constitution and national law be amended to increase protection for the right to life and of the rights of detainees;
- that the Office of the Ombudsman be fully empowered to investigate violations;
- that Lesotho ratify or accede to international human rights treaties which would strengthen the country's existing commitments; and
- that the death penalty be abolished as an affirmation of the right to life and the right not to be subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment.

Amnesty International is calling on regional and other international bodies to support Lesotho's efforts to eradicate human rights violations.

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