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LIBERIA: NEW PEACE AGREEMENTS MUST INTRODUCE HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION

There is no chance for a lasting peace in Liberia unless effective guarantees on human rights are included in the peace process, Amnesty International said in a report issued today.

The report documents human rights abuses by all parties to the Liberian conflict as well as the failures of peace-keepers in Liberia to investigate or prevent the torture and deliberate and arbitrary killing of civilians which have marked the conflict.

Amnesty International is concerned that the peace agreement, signed in August in Abuja (Nigeria), building on the Cotonou Peace Agreement of 1993, provides for an amnesty which could include those responsible for human rights abuses.

"The failure to hold such people accountable before the law encourages further violations," the human rights organization said. Amnesty International's report presents recommendations which, if implemented, could ensure human rights protection for the future.

Since it began in December in 1989, the war has resulted in the death of an estimated 150,000 Liberians and caused over 700,000 more to flee the country.

Throughout the crisis, the fighting has been marked by a blatant disregard for international humanitarian standards by all parties. The Armed Forces in Liberia (AFL) -- the national army -- often acting as an armed group independent of government control; the Liberian Peace Council (LPC) operating with AFL support; the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) which has at times controlled large parts of Liberia; the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO) -- itself divided along ethnic lines; and other factions have all ruthlessly abused human rights.

Amnesty International's report is based on information gathered over several years including a visit to Liberia and more recently to neighbouring Guinea.

The warring factions have terrorised the local population. Fighters have mutilated captives using their victims' intestines to cordon off areas newly-controlled by the victorious group, and cut up human bodies and scattered them around villages. Torture and ill-treatment have frequently preceded arbitrary killings throughout the war.

AFL soldiers systematically killed people of Gio and Mano ethnic origin at the start of the conflict. They have supervised widespread torture, murder and looting. In December 1994,

they reportedly massacred -- in collusion with the LPC -- more than 50 civilians, including 28 children under 10 years old at Paynesville near the capital, Monrovia.

In July 1994 LPC fighters at Barnabo Beach in Number Four District allegedly heated machetes in a fire and branded their captives, leaving large third-degree burns on their backs, inner thighs and groin areas. In September 1994 they reportedly cut off the fingers and ears of journalist Albert Mende. More recently, in February 1995, refugees were arriving in Buchanan, fleeing from threats of torture as the LPC attacked their villages.

In Lofa County, a ULIMO commander tortured an elderly woman by crushing her leg between two pieces of wood. In June 1995, clashes between ULIMO factions in Royesville left many civilians dead; survivors were raped and terrorized. A year previously, three Liberian refugees were deliberately and arbitrarily shot dead in Guinea by ULIMO fighters who crossed the border at will.

The NPFL is responsible for thousands of deliberate killings of civilians. In April 1995, in Yosi, an area controlled by the NPFL but contested by the LPC, 62 people -- including women and children -- were rounded up and killed; most were hacked to death. In September 1994 NPFL fighters tied up at least 20 men, women and children and threw them into the St John River at Bahla bridge, near Gbarnga: many drowned.

ECOMOG, the peace-keeping force sent to Liberia in 1990 by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), has lacked a clear mandate and has not always acted impartially; it has itself reportedly violated human rights. It is vital that its role in the peace process does not lead to further human rights abuses.

The United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL), sent in 1993 to monitor the cease-fire, has not been assertive in defending human rights. Its human rights component must now be expanded to ensure the peace process addresses these vital issues.

"It is essential not to miss the opportunity provided by the August 1995 agreement -- with leaders of the main armed factions being given a role in the executive; it is possible to introduce lasting reforms which could stop human rights abuses and introduce protection of the human rights of all Liberians," Amnesty International said.

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