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SIERRA LEONE: NEW MILITARY RULERS MUST RESPECT HUMAN RIGHTS

The soldiers who overthrew the government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah on 25 May must respect the fundamental human rights of all Sierra Leonean citizens, Amnesty International said today.

The new military government, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, headed by Major Johnny Paul Koroma, has suspended the Constitution and banned all political activity in the country. At least four members of the former government are reported to have been detained since 25 May 1997 and to be held at military headquarters in the capital, Freetown.

According to reports, all members of the former government and senior military officers have been ordered to report to military headquarters and several senior army officers are under house arrest. President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah left Sierra Leone for neighbouring Guinea on the day of the coup.

"No reasons have been given for the arrests of former politicians and it appears that they are held only because of their membership of the government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah," Amnesty International said.

A number of Sierra Leoneans working as security personnel for the United Nations (UN) were also reported to have been detained as UN premises in Freetown were broken into by soldiers and vehicles and equipment looted.

"The safety of all those detained by Sierra Leone's new military rulers must be guaranteed," Amnesty International said. "Anyone detained only because of their association with the former government should be immediately and unconditionally released."

Amnesty International fears that this latest military coup could lead to a serious deterioration in the human rights situation in Sierra Leone. The organization calls on the military government to adhere to international human rights standards and, in particular, to protect the right of every Sierra Leonean not to be arbitrarily detained, tortured or ill-treated.

According to reports, up to 100 people, both civilians and soldiers, have died in the violence which has resulted from the coup. Yesterday, soldiers were said to have opened fire to disperse thousands of civilians protesting against the military coup in Bo, southern Sierra Leone. At least one person is reported to have died. The military government has since banned all demonstrations and public meetings.

The military coup in Sierra Leone has been strongly condemned by the international community, including the UN, the Organization of African Unity and the Commonwealth. On 27 May, the UN Security Council deplored the attempt to overthrow the democratically elected government and called for an immediate restoration of constitutional order.

The government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah took office in March 1996 following parliamentary and presidential elections, ending four years of rule by the National Provisional Ruling Council -- which had come to power after a military coup in April 1992.

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For further information or to arrange an interview, please call the Amnesty International press office on +44 171 413 5566