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NEWS RELEASE

Sierra Leone: Civilians deliberately killed as fighting engulfs Freetown and Provinces

Sierra Leoneans risk being arrested, tortured and killed in the chaos and insecurity in Freetown, Amnesty International stated today as it called on all those involved in the fighting not to attack civilians.

Fierce fighting continues between West African forces, known as ECOMOG and dominated by Nigeria, and the ruling Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), joined by the former armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

Recent reports received by Amnesty International describe soldiers and RUF forces, now joined by Liberian fighters, going from house to house of those they suspect of opposing them. The organization is concerned that people perceived as supporters of the ousted government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah face a serious risk of being arrested, tortured, ill-treated or executed.

While fighting in Freetown continues, civilians in Southern and Eastern Provinces are facing an equally desperate situation as they are caught in fighting between a civil defence force, known as the *kamajors*, who support President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, and AFRC and RUF forces. Amnesty International has received information that unarmed civilians are being tortured and killed by both sides. Thousands, particularly women and children, have fled to neighbouring Liberia to escape the violence.

Several prominent members of the community in Kenema, in Eastern Province, including the chairman of the town council, B.S. Massaquoi -- who are accused of supporting the *kamajors* -- have been arrested and remain in detention; many of them have been tortured.

On Sunday, 8 February, at least 300 soldiers and RUF forces entered the town of Kenema, posing as *kamajors*, and called for civilians to join them; those who came out into the street were killed.

The humanitarian situation in Sierra Leone, already critical, has deteriorated still further with the recent increase in hostilities: there is a severe lack of food and medicine. Amnesty International is calling for humanitarian agencies to be allowed to operate without threats to their safety.

Thousands of civilians caught in the fighting in Freetown are attempting to leave. Civilians trying to leave the town by road and get behind ECOMOG lines have been obstructed

by soldiers and RUF fighters. Amnesty International is calling on all sides involved in the fighting to ensure that civilians are not prevented from leaving.

Since the military coup on 25 May 1997 Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the international community to ensure that the protection and respect of human rights feature prominently in any decisions and actions taken in efforts to find a solution to the political crisis in Sierra Leone. It has particularly called on the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in the event of a military intervention by its forces, to ensure that they adhere to international humanitarian and human rights standards at all times.

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