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Sierra Leone: Civilians face real and immediate threat to their fundamental human rights

The grave deterioration in the security situation in Sierra Leone poses a real and immediate threat to the fundamental human rights of thousands of civilians, both in the capital Freetown and the provinces, Amnesty International said today as the peace process in that country faces its most serious crisis yet.

Abuses against civilians by rebel forces during Sierra Leone's internal armed conflict have been among the worst known: killings, cutting off limbs -- most frequently arms and legs -- rape and other forms of sexual abuse and abductions. Despite the peace agreement of July 1999, Amnesty International has documented the continuation of these abuses.

"The security of civilians must be the major concern of the international community," Amnesty International said. "The UN has an obligation to ensure that civilians are protected from the atrocities that they have experienced throughout years of conflict."

The UN

The United Nations (UN) peace-keeping mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) has experienced a serious set-back as up to 500 of its troops were captured last week by rebel forces of the Revolutionary United

Front (RUF). UN peace-keeping troops, currently numbering some 8,700, had succeeded in deploying in areas of the north and east of the country still effectively under the control of rebel forces. Their gradual deployment had a positive impact on reducing the incidence of abuses against civilians. UN troops have a mandate to protect civilians under imminent risk of physical danger, within their capabilities and areas of deployment.

“We condemn any action which prevents UN peace-keeping troops from fulfilling their mandate to protect civilians,” Amnesty International said today.

Intense diplomatic activity at the highest level by the UN, West African governments and the wider international community is now underway to resolve the crisis precipitated by the capture of UN peace-keeping troops. The urgent moves currently being undertaken to reinforce UNAMSIL must ensure that all troops deployed have the training and logistical support needed to protect civilians from further human rights abuses.

Impunity

The UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, has said that the RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, who was given a prominent government position in the 1999 peace agreement, bears responsibility for this latest crisis and will be held accountable.

“The viability of the peace agreement was undermined from the outset because, by providing a blanket amnesty, it failed to address the gross human rights abuses, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, committed during the conflict,” Amnesty International said. “The peace agreement signed in Lomé was not underpinned by either justice or accountability.”

The RUF has clearly failed to comply with the most fundamental provisions of the peace agreement. RUF members, including Foday Sankoh, should therefore no longer benefit from the amnesty in that agreement. Abuses since July 1999 are, in any case, not covered by the amnesty and those responsible for the continuing killings, mutilations, rape and abductions must be brought to justice.

“The continuing political and human rights crises in Sierra Leone will not be resolved while the perpetrators of human rights abuses enjoy impunity,” Amnesty International said.

Refugees

Several hundred Sierra Leone civilians are now trying to leave the country. While some have managed to cross the border into Guinea from Kambia District in Northern Province, those arriving say that others are being prevented from leaving by RUF combatants.

“Civilians must not be prevented from leaving areas of the country where their lives and safety are at risk”, Amnesty International said.

Countries in the region -- especially Guinea, where several hundred thousand Sierra Leoneans have already sought refuge from abuses both during the conflict and since the signing of the peace agreement -- should ensure that those at risk are not prevented from entering their countries. The international community must also ensure that the safety and security of refugees are guaranteed.

More than a million people who have become internally displaced as a result of the conflict are now also increasingly at risk of human rights abuses.

Military assistance to rebel forces

A UN Security Council resolution prohibiting the sale and supply of arms, ammunition and other military equipment to rebel forces in Sierra Leone remains in force. In view of the appalling level of violence perpetrated against civilians by rebel forces, it can be assumed that any military assistance – arms, ammunition and combatants – to rebel forces will contribute to continuing violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.

“The UN Security Council, together with the governments of Liberia, Guinea and other countries in the region, must take all possible measures to prevent military assistance from reaching rebel forces,” Amnesty International said.

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