

16 June 2000

Sierra Leone: War crimes against children continue

During Sierra Leone's nine-year conflict thousands of children have been deliberately and arbitrarily killed, have had their limbs cut off, have been abducted and forced to fight and, in the case of girls, have been raped and suffered sexual exploitation, Amnesty International said today.

Children have been among the principal victims of the internal armed conflict in Sierra Leone and have suffered both disproportionately and on an unprecedented scale. Hundreds of thousands of children have become refugees or internally displaced, many of them separated from their families.

"The plight of Sierra Leone's children must be given the highest priority in efforts to resolve the current crisis," Amnesty International said today, the International Day of the African Child.

Rape

"The combatants who abducted me told me: 'You don't understand. This is the reason we go and capture you people. If you don't sleep with me today, I'll kill you'". Testimony of a girl who was raped.

"Abduction and sexual violence against girls, often very young, have been among the most abhorrent and distressing features of the conflict," Amnesty International said.

Rape, sexual slavery and other forms of sexual abuse of girls and women have been systematic, organized and widespread. Many of those abducted have been forced to become the "wives" of combatants.

Amnesty International delegates currently in Sierra Leone have obtained testimonies of the rape of girls by rebel forces in Northern Province since the

beginning of May when the current crisis began with the capture of some 500 UN peace-keepers by rebel forces.

“Rape by combatants in the conduct of armed conflict is a war crime and a crime against humanity. Those responsible for rape must be brought to justice,” Amnesty International said.

“Girls and women must be protected from rape and other forms of sexual assault and those still being held by rebel forces must be released.”

Child combatants

The extensive use of child combatants has been another alarming feature of the conflict. More than 5,000 children under the age of 18 years, both boys and girls and some as young as six years, are estimated to have fought in the conflict, with either rebel forces or government-allied forces.

Victims themselves, child combatants have also committed atrocities: many were forced to kill and mutilate through drugs, alcohol and fear.

“When I was killing, I felt like it wasn't me doing these things. I had to because the rebels threatened to kill me.” A 12-year-old boy who had been abducted by rebel forces during the conflict.

Following the peace agreement in July 1999, nearly 1,700 children had surrendered their weapons. The resumption of hostilities between government-allied and rebel forces in the last six weeks has, however, resulted in the collapse of the disarmament and demobilization program.

Further efforts to secure the release of children have been prevented and children are increasingly vulnerable to further abductions and forcible recruitment by rebel forces:

some 40 children in Makeni who had disarmed and demobilized were re-enlisted by RUF forces during the first week of May.

reports from Kambia District since the beginning of May indicate that RUF forces have been forcibly recruiting children as combatants.

The RUF continues to use child combatants in the front lines.

UN human rights officers visiting Masiaka, some 60 kilometres from Freetown, on 15 May observed that about 25 per cent of those fighting with government-allied forces were under 18 years; some freely admitted that they were aged between 7 and 14 years.

Amnesty International delegates currently in Sierra Leone witnessed on 12 June the handing over of 137 children, aged from about five to 16 years, to child protection agencies. Most were associated with the Civil Defence Forces (CDF), the civilian militia supporting the government. In a meeting with Amnesty International delegates on 25 May, the Deputy Minister of Defence, who is also National Coordinator of the CDF, denied that the CDF had recruited children.

The Sierra Leonean government has made repeated commitments to end the use of child combatants. On 25 May President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah assured an Amnesty International delegation that the use of child combatants was totally against government policy. A government statement the previous day said that "any commander who allows a child below 18 years to carry arms within his area of operations or allows children to remain in areas of active conflict will face severe disciplinary action".

"We condemn any recruitment or use of children by parties to the conflict. This is a war crime and those responsible for recruiting and using child soldiers must be brought to justice". Amnesty International said.

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Amnesty International public document - AI Index AFR 51/038/2000 - News Service Nr. 118

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