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## **Sierra Leone: Police officers who went on rampage through town and shot at protestors must be held to account**

The perpetrators of a three day police rampage through the Sierra Leonean mining town of Bumbuna, during which a woman was shot dead, at least 11 people were injured and homes and businesses were destroyed must be held to account, Amnesty International said today.

A demonstration over working conditions and pay by employees at the local iron-ore mining company African Minerals Limited (AML) on 16 April 2012 descended into chaos over the next two days when police fired live ammunition at unarmed community members and used tear gas to dispel crowds.

“This irresponsible and abusive action by the Sierra Leonean police demonstrates a terrifying disregard for the rights, and lives, of the people they are duty bound to protect,” said Lisa Sherman-Nikolaus, Amnesty International’s Sierra Leone researcher.

“A peaceful demonstration by mine workers ended in violence after police use arbitrary and excessive force. This failure of professional policing raises significant questions about the police’s ability to maintain order and respect human rights in what could prove to be tense elections in the coming months.”

While Amnesty International welcomes the public inquiry into the events of April 16 to 18 in Bumbuna, which is being conducted by Sierra Leone’s National Human Rights Commission, it calls on the government to initiate a criminal investigation to ensure those found responsible - including those with command responsibility - are held to account.

On 16 April 2012 employees at the AML mine in Bumbuna called a public demonstration and gathered outside the courthouse – a common gathering place for the community. Local police confirmed to Amnesty International that the demonstration was peaceful, but nonetheless they called in reinforcements from several other cities, including Freetown.

At around 1pm on 17 April the police entered the main marketplace in Bumbuna – approximately quarter of a mile away from the protesting mine employees – and fired tear gas and live ammunition into the air.

One woman trader told Amnesty International:

“They were just roaming all over the town shooting tear gas and bullets through the day and anywhere they saw smoke they went there and they even shot at pots where people were preparing food and they ate our own food and placed me at gun point... We are not African Mineral workers, just market women.”

The police claim they were chasing down men who were trying to set fire to a fuel depot and who had fled to the market place. However, Amnesty International was unable to find any evidence to corroborate this and eye witnesses said the police opened fire without provocation when there was no risk to their lives or the lives of others.

On the evening of 17 April, a local radio broadcaster was reporting on the events and hosting a phone in where people could report on the violence, and express their opinions on air. In the early morning of 18 April, police arrived at the station wanting to question the journalist, claiming he was inciting violence.

It appears that the police used live ammunition against people near the radio station who had gathered to prevent what they thought was the arrest of the journalist. One young man showed Amnesty International a bullet wound in his lower leg.

Later the same morning, the police fired live ammunition directly into a crowd of demonstrators marching towards the town police station to protest the police's behaviour. According to eye witnesses the police did not give any warning before opening fire.

One woman, Musu Conteh, died after receiving a bullet wound to the right side of her chest. A health worker who treated the injured told Amnesty International that 11 people sustained injuries, including a child who inhaled a chemical agent. At least six people were treated for gunshot wounds.

"We have not been able to find, and the police were not able to produce, any evidence that the protesters were armed," said Sherman-Nikolaus.

"While allegations made by the police that some protesters threw stones could be true, it is inconceivable that the use of live ammunition can be justified in this instance."

Amnesty International's understanding of the events in Bumbuna raises concerns about the relationship between the Sierra Leone police and the mining company AML, which has its headquarters in the UK.

Amnesty International asked AML to comment on their relationship with the police and the events at Bumbuna. The company confirmed that it provides some material assistance to the police including transport, infrastructure, sustenance and financial contributions; however, it did not disclose information documenting its relationship with the Sierra Leone police, who appear to provide security for the company's mining operations.

The fact that AML paid compensation to the women traders for the damage done when police ransacked the market place, raises serious questions about AML's role in the events in Bumbuna town. The company said that the compensation was paid to the market women on compassionate grounds after a request by government officials and local community, including the paramount chief.

"The absence of a freedom of information law in Sierra Leone means that documents detailing government agreements with multinational corporations are not available to the public," said Sherman-Nikolaus.

"Amnesty International calls on the government to pass the Freedom of Information Bill that is currently pending to ensure transparency between government and business transactions.

Notes to editors

\* African Minerals is a UK-based company operating in Sierra Leone. According to African Mineral Limited's 2011 annual report to its investors it is the largest private employer in Sierra Leone, employing 7,425 people – 82 per cent of whom are Sierra Leonean nationals