

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Liberia: International Contact Group must focus on ending human rights abuses**

As the International Contact Group on Liberia meets in Brussels on 12 May to continue efforts to resolve the internal armed conflict - and its regional repercussions - it should give priority to the worsening human rights and humanitarian crises afflicting the country.

"Concerted and sustained efforts are being made by the international community to find a viable solution to the crisis in Liberia and the wider region. The challenge is to ensure effective and immediate action to alleviate the suffering of Liberian civilians," Amnesty International said.

"This requires the political will to confront those directly responsible for human rights abuses as well as those indirectly contributing to the crisis by providing political and military support to various parties to the conflict, the organization added.

Hostilities - which had already exacted a terrible toll on the civilian population - have worsened since January. Fighting has spread to areas previously unaffected as the armed opposition group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) has advanced towards the capital Monrovia. In addition, a new armed group has emerged in the east along the Côte d'Ivoire border - the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). Extension of the conflict almost throughout the country has considerably increased the number of Liberian civilians and refugees of other nationalities now at risk.

Both government and armed opposition groups are committing human rights abuses. Civilians are being killed, either deliberately or caught in cross-fire, raped, forced to leave their homes, abducted and forced to fight or carry looted goods. Forcible recruitment, including of children under the age of 18, has become rampant, particularly among displaced people. Those resisting recruitment have been killed by government forces.

The International Contact Group must continue to condemn the violence against civilians caught in the conflict and insist that those responsible are held accountable

"The government of Liberia must be pressed to cooperate fully with the United Nations Peace-building Support Office (UNOL) which has a specific mandate to enhance human rights," Amnesty International said. "This must include monitoring and reporting human rights abuses."

Amnesty International remains seriously concerned that refugees and internally displaced people are particularly vulnerable and in urgent need of protection. The number of displaced people has swollen dramatically. Camps for the displaced and refugees from Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone have been deliberately attacked or caught in fighting, forcing their occupants to flee yet again. Access by humanitarian

agencies, whose staff have also been attacked and killed, is now severely restricted.

Some of the more than 40,000 Liberian refugees who had decided to return to Liberia, despite conflict there, to escape fighting in Côte d'Ivoire, have again been forced back across the border into western Côte d'Ivoire where they are at particular risk from both Ivorian government forces and armed opposition groups. Liberian refugees in the Niela camp in Côte d'Ivoire are daily being forced to join armed groups.

"Urgent measures must be taken by governments in the region to protect refugees and internally displaced people and create conditions which allow provision of emergency humanitarian assistance," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International welcomed the United Nations Security Council's resolution of 6 May which extended the arms embargo on Liberia - which applies to both government and armed opposition forces - for another year.

"There is no doubt that arms and ammunition continuing to reach those fighting in Liberia are directly contributing to the killings, torture, rape, abductions and forcible recruitment of civilians," Amnesty International said.

The government of Guinea has provided logistical and military support to the LURD and MODEL is reported to be receiving support from the Ivorian government.

"The International Contact Group should reiterate in the strongest possible terms the Security Council's call for all states in the region to cease military support for armed groups in neighbouring countries," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International is also calling on the delegation of the United Nations Security Council, which begins its visit to West Africa on 15 May, to give the highest priority to the protection of civilians and to raise these issues directly in its meetings with heads of state in the region.

## **Background**

The International Contact Group on Liberia was formed in September 2002 to respond to the political, security and humanitarian crisis in Liberia -- which has far-reaching consequences for the wider region of West Africa. It held its first working session on 19 December 2002 in Dakar, Senegal, and its second in New York on 28 February 2003. It comprises representatives of the UN, the European Union, the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), France, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, United Kingdom, and United States of America. It is coordinated by ECOWAS.

## **Public Document**

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