

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Liberia: Urgent protection needed as peace remains elusive for thousands of civilians**

Despite the peace agreement of 18 August 2003 and the establishment of a United Nations (UN) peace-keeping operation, civilians continue to be killed, raped, used as forced labour and driven from their homes, an Amnesty International delegation recently returned from Liberia concluded.

Speedy deployment of additional UN peace-keeping forces is necessary to provide protection. In addition, the perpetrators of these abuses must be made to understand that they will be held accountable.

"All parties to the conflict who signed the peace agreement a little over three months ago are violating the terms of that agreement - including a commitment to end human rights abuses," Amnesty International said.

Although the capital Monrovia enjoys an uneasy calm after the devastating events of June and July, attacks on the civilian population by former government forces and the two armed opposition groups, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), are continuing in Bong, Nimba and Grand Bassa Counties.

"Instead of being able to return to their homes, hundreds of thousands of people remain internally displaced. These numbers increase daily as civilians flee killings, rape, beatings, forced labour and extensive looting," Amnesty International said.

During their two-week visit to Liberia, Amnesty International's delegates met large numbers of internally displaced people in camps around Monrovia, in Kakata in Margibi County, Totota in Bong County and also in Sagleipie in Nimba County. Those in Kakata and Totota described how their villages were attacked and looted by LURD forces and how, as they fled, their few remaining possessions were taken by former government forces based around Sanoyie. Those in Sagleipie had fled MODEL forces as they advanced towards Tapeta and Graie, killing, looting and destroying villages. Predominantly Krahn, MODEL forces are attacking those from the Mano and Gio ethnic groups in Nimba County because of their assumed support for former President Charles Taylor.

Amnesty International delegates met representatives of the former government of Liberia, LURD and MODEL who now hold ministerial positions in the National Transitional Government of Liberia and urged them to exert influence on combatants and demand an end to abuses against civilians. It appears, however, that command and control structures have broken down.

"Those now in government should publicly condemn continuing abuses against civilians, urge the combatants whom they represent to cease these abuses immediately and make it clear that they will be held accountable," Amnesty International said.

"In addition, the international community - which brokered the peace agreement - must insist that its signatories fulfil their obligations under that agreement to respect international human rights and humanitarian law," Amnesty International said.

The UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), deployed from 1 October, has a clear mandate to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence. Only some 4,500 of its full complement of 15,000 troops have so far been deployed and UNMIL is unlikely to reach full strength until March next year at the earliest. Despite this shortfall, disarmament and demobilization are due to start on 7 December.

"It is clear that the presence of UN troops offers protection to the civilian population in the few areas where they are currently deployed," Amnesty International said. "What is needed urgently is swift deployment of additional forces, with adequate logistical support beyond Monrovia and the main route to Gbarnga. Once deployed they should vigorously pursue their mandate to protect civilians."

Despite the scale and gravity of the abuses during Liberia's protracted armed conflict, it remains unclear how those responsible will be held accountable. The peace agreement provides for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission but also says that a recommendation for a general amnesty will be considered by the National Transitional Government.

"There can be no amnesty for war crimes, crimes against humanity and other serious violations of international humanitarian law," Amnesty International said. "Those responsible for crimes under international law must be brought to justice."

"There appears at the moment to be a lack of impetus by the international community to address impunity in Liberia," Amnesty International said. "As a first step, there is an urgent need for an international, independent investigation to establish the facts, preserve evidence and identify a process to bring those responsible for these crimes before a competent court."

## **Background**

Amnesty International's delegates also received detailed accounts of the events of June and July as LURD forces encroached into Monrovia. Over a thousand civilians died as a result of indiscriminate shelling by both LURD and government forces of areas with no obvious military target, or in cross-fire. Internally displaced people and refugees in camps in Montserrado County described how the camps were attacked and civilians, including children, abducted and forcibly recruited to fight.

The delegates met a number of former child combatants, both boys and girls and some as young as 10 years, who had been forcibly recruited by both government and LURD forces. Several adolescent girls recounted how they had been taken directly from their school in Nimba County by former government forces; the majority had been raped and forced to carry ammunition or to cook for fighting forces.

## **Public Document**

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