

## **Liberia: State of emergency signifies a greater need for international involvement in human rights protection**

*In a new report released today Amnesty International expressed fears that the state of emergency imposed in Liberia on 8 February is being used as a cover to carry out further human rights violations and to crack down on freedom of expression.*

*The organization warned that; "The worsening human rights situation could have a devastating impact on regional security and in particular a threat to the fragile peace in Sierra Leone. The international community must take concrete steps to address human rights protection as a matter of urgency," Amnesty International said.*

*The report highlights an increase in human rights violations, including torture and rape, by Liberian security forces, tactics which have been used in pursuit of "dissidents" and the abduction and forcible recruitment of young men and boys to fight against the armed opposition group, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). These violations have been carried out during raids in local communities, crowded shopping areas, and in camps for internally displaced persons in Monrovia.*

*The government has failed to protect civilians from harassment and torture, including rape, by its own security forces and the LURD, leaving them vulnerable to abuses committed by both sides.*

*Massive displacement of civilians continues both internally and across borders into Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. "Yet as they flee they actually become more vulnerable," Amnesty International said. Inside Liberia and over the borders, people trying to flee have been*

stopped, had their property looted, or been fined on both sides of the border. In areas in Bomi County and close to Monrovia, there have been reports of an increase in the number of checkpoints manned by Liberian security forces which civilians report being prevented from getting closer to the capital Monrovia where they would feel safer.

The report highlights the need for the government to abide by its human rights obligations, which cannot be derogated even during a state of emergency.

Under the state of emergency, the government has further limited freedom of expression and opinion making it difficult to obtain independent and reliable information. On 12 February the Liberian government closed the offices of The Analyst newspaper, and arrested three staff, after it published an article critical of the state of emergency. The staff were later released without charge.

Several days later the head of the Justice and Peace Commission, the most prominent human rights organization, was arrested after publicly speaking out against the state of emergency.

The latest in a series of arrests took place on 28 March when five members of the National Human Rights Center of Liberia, an umbrella organization of nine human rights organizations, were arbitrarily arrested and held without charge for over 48 hours. They were picked up after they published a series of press releases probing the government about the arrests that had taken place earlier that week. The five were held without charge for a number of days until a civil court ruled in their favour and they were released. On the same day of their release, they were arrested again and charged with both criminal malevolence and preventing arrest and discharge of other duties.

*In light of the upcoming review of the mandate for the United Nations Peace-building Support Office in Liberia (UNOL), Amnesty International repeats its call made in a letter to the UN Security Council, for a strengthening of the human rights component of the UN office, and the immediate deployment of international observers with gender and child protection expertise.*

*Amnesty International welcomes recent public commitments to greater security in the sub-region by the Mano River Union Countries-Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea since the reconciliation conference in Morocco in late February. The organization also welcomes the Liberian governments move to release 21 political prisoners and in the same spirit urges the government to ensure security and unhindered access to staff members of UNOL once they are in place to enable them to carry out their work.*

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