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Sierra Leone: Human rights violators must be brought to justice

Following this morning's arrest of Foday Sankoh in Sierra Leone, Amnesty International reiterated its call for all those responsible of committing human rights abuses to be brought to justice.

Amnesty International has always maintained that the viability of the peace agreement, signed in July 1999, was undermined from the outset by providing a blanket amnesty. The human rights organization opposed the amnesty because it violated international law and failed to address the gross human rights abuses, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, committed during the conflict.

The RUF has clearly failed to abide by the terms of the agreement which it signed. Neither RUF members nor anyone else should continue to benefit from the amnesty in that agreement. The killings, mutilations, rape and abductions which continued after the amnesty are, in any case, not covered by the amnesty and those responsible must be brought to justice.

The amnesty provided in the peace agreement precludes the prosecution of anyone in Sierra Leone for human rights abuses during the internal armed conflict.

Even if the amnesty is not annulled by the Sierra Leone government, the international community must comply with its obligations under international law to bring to justice those responsible for serious violations of human rights or international humanitarian law. Any state may request the extradition of suspected perpetrators of

human rights abuses for trial in its own courts. If the Sierra Leone government does not submit the cases of such suspects to its own courts, it must nevertheless comply with any extradition request.

The human rights organization stated that any such trial must conform to international fair trial standards and not impose the death penalty.

Amnesty International firmly believes that the continuing political and human rights crises in Sierra Leone will not be resolved while the perpetrators of human rights abuses enjoy impunity.

Human rights abuses, documented by Amnesty International, committed by rebel forces in Sierra Leone both during the conflict and since the signing of the peace agreement include: killings, cutting off limbs -- most frequently arms and legs -- rape and other forms of sexual abuse and abductions.

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