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## **Public statement**

### **Liberia: Security forces must respect human rights in restoring law and order in Lofa County**

Amnesty International is concerned that the deteriorating security situation in Lofa County, northwestern Liberia, could lead to human rights violations against unarmed civilians.

Amnesty International understands that the Liberian authorities are acting to restore law and order in the area. It urges the Liberian security forces to adhere at all times to internationally recognized human rights standards, such as the United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, while carrying out operations in the area.

Security forces must respect the rights of the civilian population in the area. Civilians, irrespective of their ethnic origin or perceived stance towards the Liberian government, must be protected from unlawful killings, torture and ill-treatment or detention without charge or trial by the security forces. Basic rights such as the right to life and physical integrity may never be infringed, under international law, even in a time of crisis or emergency.

On 11 August the Liberian government announced that armed men had infiltrated the town of Kolahun and other villages and towns in Lofa County. Fighting was reported to have broken out between the attackers and government security forces. At least six aid workers have been abducted by the attackers.

The Liberian authorities have stated that the attackers came from neighbouring Guinea. In recent months, President Charles G. Taylor has repeatedly complained of the existence of training camps in Guinea for Liberian dissidents. The borders with Guinea and Sierra Leone are reported to have now been closed by the Liberian authorities.

### **Background**

The security situation in Lofa County has been extremely tense for several months.

In March 1999 at least two people were killed, and eight houses, and a Mosque, burned in the town of Zowudomai, in one of several inter-communal clashes between members of the Lorma and Mandingo ethnic groups.

In April 1999 the town of Voinjama was reportedly attacked by a group of armed men. The Liberian government accused Guinea of harbouring the attackers and political opponents of Liberia, including people of Mandingo ethnic origin.

A number of civilians, mostly belonging to the Mandingo ethnic group, were reportedly killed in Voinjama during and in the immediate aftermath of the fighting in April. Some of them were allegedly deliberately killed by the Liberian security forces. Others, including children, were reportedly detained without charge or trial by the security forces in Voinjama for several weeks after the fighting. Some were reportedly subjected to ill-treatment such as beatings.

Numerous incidents of harassment of civilians by members of the security forces have since continued to be reported.

Up to 9,000 Liberians, most belonging to the Mandingo ethnic group, have fled Liberia and sought refuge in Guinea and other neighbouring countries since the violence erupted in April.

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