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Sierra Leone: Escalating human rights abuses against civilians

Deliberate and arbitrary killings, rape and abductions of civilians have increased in Sierra Leone over the past three months despite the peace agreement, Amnesty International said today.

"Former rebel leaders now in political office must exert their influence over their former fighters and urge them to end their attacks on civilians," Amnesty International said.

The scale of human rights abuses against civilians declined significantly following the signing of the peace agreement in Lomé, Togo, in July 1999. However, the previous pattern of deliberate intimidation and terrorizing of civilians has re-emerged, particularly in Northern Province.

Both Foday Sankoh, leader of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), and Johnny Paul Koroma, leader of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) -- who seized power in a military coup in May 1997 and ruled until February 1998 -- now occupy prominent official positions. Other RUF and AFRC members have been given ministerial and deputy ministerial posts.

Although the peace agreement provided a general amnesty to rebel combatants for all acts committed during the eight-year internal armed conflict, including gross human rights abuses, the amnesty does not extend to atrocities committed since the signing of the peace agreement.

"It must be made clear to rebel combatants that they will be held accountable for continuing human rights abuses," Amnesty International said. "Those responsible must be identified and brought to justice."

On 22 November the Special Representative of the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General in Sierra Leone reported that deliberate and arbitrary killings, rape and abduction of civilians, as well as destruction of homes, by rebel forces were occurring almost daily on villages in northwestern Sierra Leone. Similar abuses have also recently been reported around the town of Kabala in Northern Province.

Rebel combatants intercepted a vehicle belonging to a humanitarian organization on 17 November and forced all its occupants, including nursing mothers and malnourished children, to walk into the bush. Some were then raped or assaulted. In Kambia District, Northern Province, a traditional chief was reported to have been stripped, beaten and killed by rebel combatants on 19 November when he was unable to meet their demands for money.

"The international community should continue to bring all possible pressure to bear on former and current rebel leaders, in order to ensure that their forces adhere to commitments made in the peace agreement to respect the fundamental human rights of all Sierra Leoneans," the organization said.

The peace agreement specified that all non-combatants held captive by rebel forces were to be released; however, only a comparatively small number of civilians have so far been freed. More than 2,000 children, some 60 per cent of them girls, remain missing following the rebel incursion into Freetown in January 1999. Almost without exception, women and girls have been raped or subjected to other forms of sexual abuse.

"Former rebel leaders must insist that their combatants immediately release all captured civilians, including women and children," the organization added. "Failure to do so is a blatant violation of the peace agreement."

The UN Security Council has authorized the deployment of an international peace-keeping force of some 6,000 troops to assist with implementation of the peace agreement, in particular monitoring the cease-fire and the disarmament and demobilization of former combatants. Troops from Kenya and India are now being deployed together with West African forces already in Sierra Leone. The peace-keeping force is mandated to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence, within its capabilities and areas of deployment.

"The peace-keeping force must be trained in international human rights and humanitarian law and take all possible measures to protect civilians from human rights abuses," Amnesty International said.

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