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PUBLIC STATEMENT

SIERRA LEONE

Amnesty International appeals for commutation of 16 death sentences

This week's sentencing of 16 civilians to death does not contribute to the process of reconciliation, Amnesty International declared today. The organization is calling on the government to commute these and any other death sentences.

The High Court in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, imposed these sentences on 25 August. Those condemned to death are among 58 civilians, including journalists, bank and government officials, being tried for treason and other offences in three separate trials before the High Court in Freetown. Those convicted by the High Court may appeal to the Court of Appeal and, if the appeal is unsuccessful, to the Supreme Court.

The charges relate to the military coup on 25 May 1997 in which the elected government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was overthrown. The military formed the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) which ruled until 12 February 1998 when forces of the Economic Community of West African States Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) took control of Freetown. President Kabbah returned to Freetown on 10 March 1998. The civilians recently sentenced to death were charged in connection with their alleged complicity with the AFRC.

Another trial, that of 38 soldiers charged with mutiny, failure to suppress a mutiny, treason and conspiracy began before a court martial on 23 July 1998. Trials before courts martial in Sierra Leone allow no right of appeal against conviction and sentence to a higher jurisdiction, in violation of international standards for a fair trial.

There are strong feelings within Sierra Leone against those brought to trial. Killings, torture, rape, arbitrary arrest and detention were widespread throughout the period of AFRC rule.

Since the AFRC and its political ally, the armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF), were forced from power in February 1998, AFRC and RUF forces have unleashed a campaign of deliberate and arbitrary killing and mutilation against civilians in the east and north of the country. Thousands of people have been killed and hundreds have suffered amputations of their hands, arms, legs, ears or lips. Amnesty International has repeatedly condemned the gross human rights abuses committed by the AFRC and RUF and called for action to be taken to bring them to an end.

Amnesty International acknowledges the government's responsibility to bring to justice and punish those responsible for these crimes and also insists that there should be no impunity for human rights violations. It is, however, unconditionally opposed to the death penalty. Nowhere has it been shown that the death penalty has any special power to reduce crime or political violence. Neither has it ever been shown to have any special power to meet any genuine social need.

A difficult and daunting task faces Sierra Leone in achieving reconciliation within its society after the atrocities committed by the AFRC and RUF. Amnesty International believes that the use of the death penalty not only gives the false impression that preventative action is being taken, but perpetuates the use of cruel and inhuman punishment, and does nothing to contribute to the process of reconciliation.

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