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LIBERIA: POLITICAL SOLUTIONS TO LIBERIA'S ARMED CONFLICT MUST INCLUDE RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

As West African leaders meet in the Nigerian capital, Abuja, to discuss solutions to the six-year-old armed conflict in Liberia, Amnesty International warned that unless human rights top the agenda abuses will continue unchecked.

“Any solution to Liberia’s armed conflict must include investigations into the cases of the thousands of unarmed civilians who have been killed or who have suffered horrifying abuses at the hands of armed factions,” Amnesty International said today.

“The victims of this tragic conflict have the right to justice. It is only when those responsible are brought to account for their crimes that a clear message is sent that human rights abuses will not be tolerated under any circumstances.”

The principle of accountability is vital in human rights protection. It is essential that any agreement reached includes both mechanisms to ensure that human rights abuses are thoroughly investigated and remedied and also basic institutional reforms for long-term future protection of human rights.

The latest major outbreak of violence shows the urgent need for the proper reporting and investigation of human rights abuses. It began in the capital, Monrovia, in April 1996 when police, reportedly allied to one armed faction, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, NPFL, tried to arrest Roosevelt Johnson, the leader of a rival armed faction, ULIMO-J¹, on suspicion that he had been involved in the murder of an associate of an opponent. The power-sharing organized by the August 1995 Abuja peace agreement did not provide for an independent law enforcement body and so what was generally viewed as factional settling of scores sparked off two months of fighting and violence.

During this period, as throughout the conflict, fighting has been marked by a blatant disregard for international human rights and humanitarian standards. Fighters loyal to Roosevelt Johnson have held hundreds hostage and all factions have deliberately and arbitrarily killed civilians. No attempt has been made to investigate these abuses.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has played an important role in the Liberian armed conflict by sending its troops, the ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) into Liberia in 1990 in an effort to stop the civil war, and by participating in numerous rounds of peace negotiations. Most recently, ECOWAS Heads of State met in late July 1996 to consider political solutions after the August 1995 Abuja peace agreement had so clearly been violated by two months of intense fighting and violence against civilians in Monrovia.

¹United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO) which is split into two factions along ethnic lines: ULIMO-J, the Krahn group led by Roosevelt Johnson and ULIMO-K, the Mandingo group led by Alhaji G.V. Kromah

The Heads of State discussed bringing the faction leaders before war crimes tribunals and other sanctions if they failed to cease hostilities and proceed with disarmament and elections. A decision about possible sanctions was postponed until further meetings taking place this week.

Since the July meeting three of the faction leaders declared an immediate cease-fire and their total commitment to the August 1995 Abuja peace agreement.

“It is essential that ECOWAS Heads of State seriously address the crucial question of accountability as a fundamental requisite for peace and respect for the rule of law, rather than as a political bargaining chip,” Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International urges ECOWAS to set up a panel of experts with the necessary powers, resources, professional competence and guarantees of independence and impartiality to carry out prompt and effective investigations into abuses during the conflict. Their findings should be made public and should include recommendations for bringing those responsible to justice, as well as institutional reform and other preventive measures. It is essential that witnesses are protected against reprisals so that Liberians and others can testify in safety about their own experiences.

Those who have suffered gross human rights abuses at the hands of all armed factions in Liberia have the right to full and public disclosure of the truth, including the determination and public acknowledgement of responsibility.

“Bringing those responsible to justice is a preventive rather than a vengeful measure. It is essential in breaking the cycle of violence and impunity and ensuring that such horrors do not recur,” Amnesty International said. “Making the perpetrators account for their crimes is an essential component of healing wounds in society after large-scale abuses of human rights.”
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