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Liberia: Government doing little to ease pain of haunted past

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(Monrovia) -- Amnesty International today revealed that the Liberian government has done little or nothing to bring to justice thousands of people accused of serious human rights violations that took place during the country's protracted armed conflict, in which hundreds of thousands were killed, raped or tortured.

Launching a new report, *Truth, justice and reparation for Liberia's victims*, the organization urged Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf to immediately put in place a plan to ensure that perpetrators of past human rights abuses are brought to justice so that the cycle of violence that plagued Liberia for years can finally come to an end.

"Although the Truth and Reconciliation Commission currently in place is an important first step, much more can and should be done by the government to address past human rights abuses," said Kolawole Olaniyan, Amnesty International's Africa Programme Director, speaking in Monrovia.

"The government should not wait for the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission before beginning the process of deciding when and how those suspected of committing human rights abuses will be brought to justice -- nor should victims wait to receive reparations."

"Although the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has an important role to play in establishing the truth of many of the horrific incidents that took place during the years of conflict in Liberia, it is not a substitute for a court of law. It cannot establish individual criminal responsibility or provide for full reparations to victims," said Olaniyan.

It is difficult to estimate how many were killed in massacres during the 14 years of conflict in Liberia, which was characterized by mass killings and rape. At least sixty percent of the population is estimated to have suffered some form of sexual violence.

"Societies that have emerged from a long history of human rights abuses, like Liberia has, must create a long-term plan to ensure that the truth is told, that justice is done, and that adequate compensation is provided to victims," said Olaniyan. "This is the only way to ensure that the horrors of the past are never repeated."

Amnesty International admitted that there are both political and practical challenges in addressing impunity in Liberia, with some current Members of Parliament alleged to have committed human rights abuses themselves and the challenge of operating in a climate of post-war economic difficulties.

"Passing appropriate legislation in Congress to bring all perpetrators to justice in Liberia will be a major challenge -- but is one that the government must tackle head-on, not least because it has a legal obligation to do so," said Olaniyan.

"Failing to punish suspected perpetrators allows them to believe that they will not have to face the consequences of their horrific acts, ignores the distress of the victims, and creates a risk of further violations."

The government has made no formal plans for providing reparations to the hundreds of thousands of victims of rape, torture or sexual violence or to children who were forced to enlist in armed groups. As a result, victims have been left to suffer without official acknowledgement of the crimes committed against them or assistance to rebuild their lives. Amnesty International urged the government to come up with an action plan for reparations that particularly takes into account ensuring counselling for children and medical care for women who have been victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence

"President Johnson-Sirleaf took a stand against impunity when she turned Charles Taylor over to the Special Court for Sierra Leone so that he could be tried for crimes against the people of Sierra Leone. She now needs to display that same leadership in addressing violations against the people of Liberia," said Olaniyan.

Background

In June 2006, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) began operating in Liberia as part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The TRC was mandated to contribute to justice and reparation by establishing the facts about past crimes.

However, little effort has been made to investigate and document the rape and other forms of sexual violence perpetrated during the years of armed conflict. As a result, there is no effective basis for eventual prosecution of the alleged perpetrators of those crimes. Many women are forced to live near their attackers -- passing them on the streets and in the markets -- fearing that their abusers will never be brought to justice.

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