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Liberia: Human rights must be priority at International Reconstruction Conference

As the international community meets in New York on 5 and 6 February to discuss post-conflict reconstruction in Liberia, Amnesty International urges that good governance, the rule of law and respect for human rights are given the highest priority.

"Protracted conflict has not only destroyed the social and economic fabric of Liberia, it has also eroded the most fundamental human rights," Amnesty International said. "Unwavering political commitment and prompt, generous and sustained funding are needed to meet the ambitious plans for the next two years - not least for the protection and promotion of human rights," Amnesty International added.

Despite the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in August 2003, hostilities have continued and civilians have continued to be killed, raped, beaten, used as forced labour and driven from their homes by all parties to the conflict: the former government of Liberia, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). All three groups are now represented in the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL).

"A strong message must go out to the signatories to abide by the peace agreement - including a commitment to end human rights abuses," Amnesty International said.

Durable peace will not be achieved in Liberia unless those responsible for crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law are held accountable and justice is achieved for the victims. The peace agreement provides for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission but also says that a recommendation for amnesty will be considered by the NTGL.

"The UN, which is co-hosting the conference, must state explicitly that there can be no amnesty for crimes under international law and impress upon those participating in the conference the obligation and imperative to bring perpetrators of these crimes to justice," Amnesty International said.

While the initial pace of deployment of troops of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) was slow, recent weeks have seen significant progress. Deployment in areas where civilians remain at risk, however, is as yet only rudimentary.

"The full complement of 15,000 peace-keeping troops, with adequate logistical support, must be achieved as soon as possible," Amnesty International said. "Swift deployment throughout the country and effective implementation of UNMIL's mandate to protect civilians are crucial."

Consolidation of peace, security and the rule of law is dependent on successful completion of the disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and rehabilitation program. Of particular concern is the large number of children associated with fighting forces. It is planned to reunite with their families or place in

community-based care some 15,500 former child combatants by the end of 2005.

"Adequate resources must be given to the rehabilitation of former child combatants, including addressing their particular social, psychological and material needs, in order to ensure early and effective reintegration into their families and communities," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International welcomes proposals which aim to protect the rights of women and girls, including support for those affected by sexual violence during the conflict.

The Armed Forces of Liberia and elite paramilitary personnel, as well as loosely defined militia, have been responsible for serious human rights violations, as have LURD and MODEL combatants, and the police force, riddled with endemic corruption, has operated as an instrument of oppression.

"Restructuring and training of the armed forces and the police must include training in international human rights standards in law enforcement," Amnesty International said. "There should also be effective and fair screening programs of recruits to ensure that those alleged to be responsible for human rights abuses are not absorbed into the new armed forces and police service."

Judicial institutions throughout Liberia have collapsed; most courts no longer function and much of the infrastructure has been destroyed and looted. Corruption and political interference have undermined public confidence in the judiciary.

"Rehabilitation of the judicial system - both physical infrastructure and personnel - must be a priority. Adequate and sustained commitment is needed to ensure the creation of a professional, independent and credible judiciary," Amnesty International said.

The entire population of Liberia has been affected by the conflict. There are an estimated 500,000 internally displaced people and several hundred thousand refugees in neighbouring countries. These groups have been particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses.

"Ambitious plans to facilitate safe, voluntary and sustainable return of Liberian refugees and internally displaced people to their homes will require substantial and long-term injection of resources, including to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and non-governmental organizations," Amnesty International said.

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