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Haiti: Protection of human rights essential for security and long-term stability

Last week's devastating flooding in Haiti is another compelling reason for the international community to take action to address the humanitarian and human rights crisis in Haiti, said Amnesty International today.

Haiti's ongoing insecurity and political instability are rooted in a long history of economic and social inequalities. MINUSTAH should make the most of the humanitarian provisions of its mandate, including by assisting the Haitian government in developing programs for the provision of basic social services, such as health, nutrition, water and sanitation.

On the eve of the hand-over of power from the United Nations' Multilateral Interim Force (MIF) Stabilization mission to the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), ordinary Haitians are still living in fear and insecurity, while armed gangs remain in de facto control of much of the country.

"Disarmament of armed groups and the re-establishment of the rule of law throughout the country must be the first step towards ensuring safety for civilians in Haiti" said Amnesty International. "It is regrettable that neither the MIF nor the interim government have made any credible attempts to initiate, or even propose, comprehensive nationwide disarmament programs."

As its first priority, the UN Mission must carry out the disarmament that has so long been promised, but never achieved. Only when minimum levels of security and the framework of government authority are re-established, will MINUSTAH be able to deal effectively with the other elements of their mandate: support to the interim government in the rebuilding of the police, prisons and judiciary and the establishment of the rule of law.

"Such a mandate requires the strong support and commitment of the nations which make up the UN. Amnesty International urges all member states of the UN to contribute the necessary troops and civilian police officers as soon as possible to make this mission a success. French speaking countries are particularly urged to provide personnel."

The restoration of an independent judiciary and the development of a police force and prison system that observe human rights obligations must also be high on the list of priorities for MINUSTAH. Amnesty International is concerned that former military personnel with a record of human rights violations may be, or may have already been, incorporated into the police force. MINUSTAH must ensure that a vetting process is urgently established for the recruitment of new and the screening of existing police officers in order to prevent perpetrators of human rights abuses from joining the new Haitian police force.

All past and current human rights abuses should be promptly, thoroughly and impartially investigated, and those responsible -- regardless of their position of power or political views -- be brought to justice.

"MINUSTAH must send a strong and unambiguous message that it will not tolerate impunity and that it will be serious about its mandate of protecting and promoting human rights," said Amnesty International.

"MINUSTAH has a crucial support role to play to ensure that the interim government and human rights institutions and groups effectively protect human rights; that accountability for all abuses is established and that victims obtain redress."

Furthermore, accountability must extend to the UN's own personnel. MIF forces have allegedly used excessive force and intimidation during search and detention operations, and Amnesty International has urged the US Command of the MIF to carry out thorough and impartial investigations into all such incidents, and to identify and deal appropriately with those responsible for any abuses.

"MINUSTAH must allocate a central place to the promotion and protection of human rights -- this entails ensuring that its own peace-keeping troops and civilian police strictly adhere to international human rights and international humanitarian law standards," said Amnesty International.

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