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Liberia: Civilians at risk as president calls for a state of emergency

"The state of emergency declared last Friday in Liberia is being used as a justification by the security forces to abuse power and commit human rights violations against the civilian population," Amnesty International warned today.

Panic has spread amongst the civilian population amidst reports that security forces have been carrying out the detention and forcible recruitment of young men and boys, and harassment and arrests associated with dissident hunting, and looting of civilian property by the security forces, which reportedly took place over the weekend. The actions of the security forces directly contradict public assurances made by President Taylor on Friday that the state of emergency would in no way affect the civil liberties of the Liberian people.

"These incidents are likely to lead to further abuses such as the rounding up and detaining or killing of "suspected dissidents" which may include political opponents, human rights activists and ordinary citizens," the organization said.

On Sunday 39 young men and boys were reportedly rounded up from various churches around Monrovia and forcibly taken to a field near Duala market. They were told they had to fight with the army and forced to sit with their shirts tied together for several hours. Many fled the normally busy market in panic, fearful that they too would be rounded up and forced to fight with the government army. Amnesty International is opposed to the recruitment of children into the armed forces and is concerned that those rounded up included children.

Article 86 of the Liberian Constitution gives the President, with the approval of the Legislature, the ability to declare a state of emergency and the discretion to suspend such rights as freedom of speech and assembly.

The fear is that the state of emergency will put pressure on normally independent and reliable sources of information to exercise extreme self censorship for fear of reprisal by the government. These measures will severely limit the outside world from knowing actual events taking place in the country and put civilians in an increasingly vulnerable situation and at greater risk of human rights abuses.

"The Liberian government should stop the current abuses being carried out by security forces and abide by its obligations under its constitution and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, to which it is a signatory", Amnesty International said.

As the situation in Liberia verges on total chaos and with the government showing little resolve to protect civilians from the actions of rebel groups or their own security forces, the international community must play a stronger role to ensure that civilians are protected.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>