

LIBERIA: CULTURE OF IMPUNITY AND CONTINUING HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES BY PEACE-KEEPERS MUST END AS NEW DEMOCRATIC ERA DAWNS

Immediately ending the culture of impunity which has infested Liberia for years must feature high up on the agenda of the country's first democratic government in eight years, due to be elected on 19 July, Amnesty International said today.

The statement follows an official welcome by the government, political parties and non-governmental human rights organizations of Amnesty International's recommendation to establish an independent human rights institution with the powers to investigate complaints of human rights violations and to carry out human rights education programs, as proposed by a delegation during a recent visit to Liberia.

"There was also a general consensus that the police, military and prison system needed restructuring and training in international human rights standards on law enforcement," the human rights organization said.

Civil society organizations and certain former faction leaders said they would welcome a Truth Commission, similar to that operating in South Africa, to inquire into the atrocities committed against the civilian population in Liberia. Some also called for the creation of a War Crimes Tribunal.

Massive human rights abuses were inflicted on Liberia's 2.8 million people during its bloody civil war, lasting from 1989 to 1997. About 200,000 Liberian people were killed, over 700,000 became refugees, and an estimated 1.4 million people are internally displaced.

"The importance of finding out the truth is imperative; not just for victims and survivors of human rights abuses, but for the future of Liberia. Only when the issue of past human rights violations is addressed can there be enduring peace and true reconciliation in Liberia," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International is also concerned about continuing human rights abuses by soldiers from the West African peace-keeping force, ECOMOG, who presently carry out regular law enforcement functions in Liberia. For example, one person was recently beaten to death and four others tortured by peace-keepers who were supposedly looking for weapons in Lajoy village in Grand Cape Mount County.

"The use of force had nothing to do with self-defence and everything to do with intimidation, interrogation and a blatant disregard for humanitarian and human rights law,"

Amnesty International said. During its mission, Amnesty International delegates met other victims of ECOMOG brutality who reported beatings and torture.

The UN Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) in 1995 was entrusted with the mandate to investigate and report on human rights violations. Amnesty International is disappointed that despite repeated complaints of human rights violations committed by the armed factions and the ECOMOG peace-keeping force UNOMIL has not issued detailed public reports of these investigations to the UN.

“The Security Council was informed in March that the UN had sent ECOMOG details of allegations that ECOMOG soldiers had mistreated former fighters and civilians during weapons-recovery operations but no action has so far been taken by the Economic Community of West African States or by the ECOMOG peace-keeping operation to follow up these allegations,” Amnesty International said.

“We are also alarmed by the fact that no real steps have been taken to ensure that ECOMOG respects the rights of detainees or those who are questioned. In the absence of a Status of Forces Agreement, ECOMOG appears to be operating outside any legal framework and detainees remain at risk of ill-treatment.”

Despite the call from the UN Commission on Human Rights for human rights monitors to be deployed at least during and after the elections, so far there are no plans for such deployment. There are currently only three United Nations human rights officers investigating and reporting on human rights violations throughout Liberia.

“Proposals for a substantial increase in the human rights presence need to be drawn up as soon as possible. A needs assessment mission should also be undertaken to consider what sort of technical cooperation and advisory services can be offered to the new police force, the army, judiciary and local human rights organizations,” Amnesty International said.

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