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Liberia: War in Lofa County does not justify killing, torture and abduction

" One of the ATU [Anti-Terrorist Unit] members told the others: >He is going to give us information on the rebel business=. They took me to Gbatala. I saw many holes in which prisoners were held. I could hear them crying, calling for help and lamenting that they were hungry and they were dying.@ (Testimony of a young man detained at Gbatala military base in August 2000.)

Amnesty International is calling on the Liberian government to ensure that widespread torture, including rape and killings by the security forces of unarmed citizens suspected of supporting Liberian armed opposition groups are immediately stopped.

In a report published by Amnesty International today -- *Liberia: War in Lofa County does not justify killing, torture and abduction* -- the organization details the findings of a recent visit to the country and also calls on armed opposition groups based in Guinea immediately to end abductions of civilians and other abuses in Liberia.

"The fighting in Lofa County has been marked by widespread human rights abuses. The international community must act urgently to stop these abuses, including by interceding with the Liberian government and requesting the Guinean government to use its influence over Liberian armed opposition groups based in its territory," Amnesty International said.

Since the renewal of armed incursions from Guinea into Lofa County in July 2000, the human rights situation has progressively deteriorated. Women and girls fleeing the outbreak of hostilities since February 2001 have been arrested at checkpoints and gang-raped by Liberian government forces. In early April 2001, a pregnant woman was grabbed near Zorzor, Lofa County, by an officer of the Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU), a special government security unit. She was repeatedly raped until being released a few days later. ATU officers beat her and stamped on her stomach, as a result of which she lost her baby.

Since mid-2000, dozens of civilians have allegedly been deliberately killed on suspicion of backing armed incursions from Guinea, and more than 100 civilians, mostly Mandingos, have been tortured by the ATU and other government forces. Unofficial detention centres include the military base in Gbatala, central Liberia, recently investigated by the UN as a training base for the Sierra Leonean armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF), responsible for widespread killings, abductions, mutilations and other abuses in Sierra Leone. Other suspected dissidents have been held and tortured at the ATU cells behind the Executive Mansion, the office of the presidency in Monrovia, the capital.

According to testimonies and other evidence gathered by Amnesty International during its three-week visit to Liberia in February 2001, civilians suspected of backing the dissidents are held in holes - some filled with dirty water - dug in the ground, at the military base in Gbatala. Prisoners are kicked and beaten including with gun butts; some have had plastic melted on their bodies or cigarettes extinguished on their skin and others have been forced to roll in mud, walk on broken glass with their bare feet or eat hot pepper. Suspects are regularly *tabied*, which means that their arms are tied together so tightly behind their backs that their elbows touch. The victims met by Amnesty International delegates still bore scars and marks of torture and were visibly traumatized.

In early April 2001, in response to significant military advances in upper Lofa County by the armed opposition groups, President Charles Taylor reportedly announced that a 15,000 force composed of former fighters of his warring faction, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), would be assembled to fight in Lofa County. The NPFL, as well as other former warring factions, was responsible for widespread human rights abuses during the 1989-1996 civil war. Amnesty International calls on the Liberian government to ensure that these forces do not carry out further human rights violations.

As a result of renewed fighting in Lofa County in July 2000 and pending further UN sanctions on Liberia, currently under discussion internal repression and intolerance by the government of any form of scrutiny by Liberian human rights organizations, journalists, students and opposition members has reached alarming levels. The security forces have used a wide range of methods including rape and other forms of torture to silence government critics. Since July 2000, human rights defenders, journalists or political opponents have been continuously arbitrarily arrested, tortured or forced to flee the country. During one of the latest crackdowns, on 21 March 2001, more than 40 university students, often on the front-line in promoting and defending human rights in Liberia, were held incommunicado and beaten with gun butts, kicked and humiliated by members of the Special Operation Division (SOD) and the ATU. Female students were raped.

Background information

Following the publication in December 2000 of a UN report containing detailed evidence of Liberian military support to the RUF and the illicit trade of diamonds from RUF-held areas through Liberia, the UN Security Council on 7 March 2001 reiterated the 1992 ban on arms transfers to Liberia. It also introduced a new ban on diamond exports from Liberia

and travel for senior officials. The ban is due to come into effect on 7 May 2001, unless Liberia complies with the UN Security Council's demands which include ceasing military support to the RUF, expelling RUF members from Liberia and ending the import of rough diamonds from Sierra Leone.

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