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Liberia: Peace talks in Ghana must find urgent solution to protect civilians

Amnesty International is calling on all those participating in the negotiations on Liberia to give the utmost priority to protecting the hundreds of thousands of civilians now caught in fighting in Liberia's capital, Monrovia.

In the last few days -- while representatives of the international community have been meeting in Akosombo, Ghana, to find a solution to Liberia's internal armed conflict, -- fighting between the armed opposition Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and government forces has reached the streets of Monrovia.

"Hundreds of thousands of people, many of whom have converged on Monrovia to escape fighting as LURD forces have advanced, face serious human rights abuses as well as a catastrophic humanitarian situation," Amnesty International said.

"Many of these people had already been displaced and have been forced to leave camps on the outskirts of Monrovia. This latest intensification of fighting is preventing humanitarian assistance from reaching practically the entire population of Liberia."

Foreign nationals, including staff of humanitarian agencies, are being evacuated from the capital.

"The international community and representatives of the parties to the conflict now in Akosombo must urgently address the crisis facing Liberia's civilian population," Amnesty International said today.

While it is difficult to obtain detailed and corroborated information from Monrovia, civilians clearly remain at risk of the grave abuses by government and armed opposition groups which have marked the conflict since it began in 1999. Large numbers have been deliberately killed or caught in cross-fire; they have also been arbitrarily detained and tortured. Women and girls have been raped and large numbers of young men and boys, including many aged under 18, have been forcibly recruited to fight.

"Representatives of the parties to the conflict, including the Liberian government, LURD and the separate armed opposition Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), now in Akosombo must be urged to give immediate and unequivocal instructions to their combatants to adhere strictly to international human rights and humanitarian law," Amnesty International said.

"This is a vital opportunity for the international community to confront and influence directly the leaders of all parties to the conflict."

While making efforts to seek a durable and longer-term solution to Liberia's conflict, steps to protect civilians must be taken immediately by those brokering the talks -- the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the International Contact Group on Liberia, which includes representatives of the United Nations (UN), the African Union and the European Union.

A clear message must also go out that those responsible for human rights abuses will be held accountable. This has been echoed by the UN Secretary-General who yesterday, while calling for the protection of civilians, reminded the perpetrators of violations of international human rights and humanitarian law that they will be held accountable.

The UN Security Council also yesterday called on all parties to the conflict to take all necessary measures to ensure that civilians are not targeted and to provide guarantees for safe and unhindered access by humanitarian agencies to vulnerable groups. High-level regional mediators have left Ghana for Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia in an attempt to encourage a cease-fire.

Arms, ammunition and military equipment continue to reach Liberia despite UN sanctions, renewed as recently as 6 May this year, on the Liberian government and also on armed opposition groups fighting in Liberia.

"Continuing military support to those fighting in Liberia is contributing to grave abuses against civilians," Amnesty International said.

"All countries, including Liberia's neighbours Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, must take all possible measures to implement UN sanctions and prevent arms, ammunition and other military assistance from reaching Liberia," Amnesty International concluded.

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