

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 34/016/2003 (Public)  
News Service No: 183  
4 August 2003

## **Liberia: West African forces must protect civilians from widespread human rights abuses**

The deployment of West African troops must result in protection of civilians who have suffered for so long from grave human rights abuses by all sides, Amnesty International said today as the first contingent of Nigerian troops began to arrive in the capital, Monrovia.

On Friday Amnesty International called on the United Nations Security Council to provide a strong and unambiguous mandate to protect civilians for the initial deployment of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) forces.

The Security Council resolution authorizing a multi-national force stresses the need to create a secure environment which encourages respect for human rights, protects the well-being of civilians and facilitates the work of humanitarian agencies. However, it does not provide an explicit mandate in the operative part of the resolution to protect civilians and humanitarian workers from threats of physical violence, as has been provided to other international peace-keeping operations.

"While welcoming an initiative which hopefully will go some way to ending the protracted suffering of the Liberian people, we had hoped for much stronger and more explicit language on protection of civilians. The multi-national force must be instructed to protect civilians and humanitarian workers from physical violence at all times throughout Liberia," Amnesty International said.

The onslaught on Monrovia since early June by the armed opposition Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and hostilities with government forces have exacted a terrible toll. Hundreds of civilians have been killed or wounded as LURD forces have indiscriminately shelled the capital. Law and order has broken down completely. Government forces and militia have killed, raped and forcibly recruited children to fight. They have also looted property from both civilians and humanitarian agencies. The humanitarian crisis facing the civilian population has reached a critical level.

"All troops participating in the multi-national force must have the necessary training - including in the protection of the rights of women and children - as well as logistical support in order to protect civilians from the widespread and systematic abuses which they have suffered throughout Liberia's conflict but which have become so much worse in recent weeks and months," the organization stressed.

ECOWAS forces will be playing a critical role in Liberia as they support implementation of the cease-fire agreement of 17 June and pave the way for a United Nations peace-keeping force.

"So much now depends on the deployment of ECOWAS troops to alleviate the grave human rights and humanitarian crisis facing the Liberian population," Amnesty International said.

"Not only must they protect civilians from abuses by combatants from both sides, they also have an obligation themselves to comply fully with international human rights and humanitarian law applicable to peace-keeping forces," the organization added. This is all the more important since the Security Council resolution effectively provides permanent impunity to peace-keeping forces for international crimes unless the country sending the troops chooses to try them.

During previous deployments in both Liberia and neighbouring Sierra Leone, ECOWAS troops have been responsible for indiscriminate aerial bombardments resulting in large numbers of civilian casualties, extrajudicial executions, torture and illegal arrests and detention. Despite promises of an investigation after Amnesty International intervened with the ECOWAS Executive Secretary about human rights violations by ECOWAS troops in Sierra Leone, none took place and the perpetrators were never brought to justice.

Amnesty International is also calling on the United Nations Security Council to ensure that the United Nations peace-keeping force which is envisaged to follow on from the initial deployment of ECOWAS forces is provided with a much more specific and stronger mandate for the protection of civilians.

### **Background**

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1497 (2003) of 1 August 2003 authorized deployment of a multi-national force to support implementation of the cease-fire agreed on 17 June 2003 between the Liberian government and two armed opposition groups, the LURD and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). This cease-fire had collapsed within a week. The initial deployment of a "vanguard" ECOWAS force - with troops from Nigeria, Ghana, Mali and Senegal - from today will be followed by a full multi-national force. The resolution explicitly refers to the departure of President Charles Taylor. The Security Council anticipates a subsequent United Nations stabilizing force to support an eventual transitional government and assist in implementation of a comprehensive peace agreement - which has yet to be reached.

Public Document

\*\*\*\*\*

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>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>