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Liberia: United Nations Security Council resolution lays sound foundation for human rights protection

Amnesty International today welcomed Security Council Resolution 1509 (2003) which establishes a United Nations peace-keeping operation in Liberia (UNMIL) and provides for a UN human rights presence to protect, promote and monitor human rights.

"The text of the resolution is not as strong as we would have liked, but is a great improvement on earlier drafts that were a seriously deficient response to the human rights crisis in Liberia, which continues despite cease-fire and peace agreements" Amnesty International said. Earlier drafts lacked a clear and unambiguous mandate for the United Nations to protect and promote human rights, as Amnesty International had called for.

"We were concerned that the resolution should reflect the strong human rights provisions included in the Secretary-General's report of 11 September, and appreciate that the resolution has been changed to welcome the Secretary-General's report and its recommendations," Amnesty International said. "We stress once again that the human rights component of UNMIL must report regularly and publicly on human rights developments."

The resolution also provides UNMIL with a mandate to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence, within its capabilities. "We hope that this mandate will be given a broad interpretation to effectively protect civilians throughout the country. Therefore, it is necessary that peace-keeping troops, which must be well trained in human rights, will be swiftly deployed, in sufficient numbers and with adequate logistical support."

Another serious omission in earlier drafts was the lack of any reference to bringing perpetrators of war crimes, crimes against humanity and other serious violations of international humanitarian law to justice. During almost 14 years of conflict, civilians, including women and children, have been subjected by all parties to the conflict to killings, torture, including rape and other forms of sexual violence, abduction and forcible recruitment to fight.

"We welcome that the resolution, in its operative part, not only calls on all parties to cease the use of child soldiers and all other human rights violations against the Liberian population but also explicitly stresses the need to bring those responsible to justice," Amnesty International said.

There can be no impunity for violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. Amnesty International has called for an international, independent investigation to establish accountability and to recommend an appropriate court to try those alleged to be responsible. This should be a first step in the development of a comprehensive, long-term strategy, by the international community and the Liberian

people, to end impunity in Liberia.

Women and children have been predominant among those affected by the conflict. "The Security Council has recognized the devastating impact of the conflict on the lives of women and children in Liberia and the need for these to be addressed by UNMIL, including during the DDR process. We hope that this will be reflected in the appointment of senior gender and child protection advisers to the office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Liberia."

The challenge is now to ensure that the provisions of today's resolution and the recommendations of the Secretary-General for protection and the promotion of human rights are fully implemented. Human rights must be an integral part of all aspects of UNMIL if it is immediately to protect human rights and also contribute to longer-term reconstruction of Liberia based on the rule of law and respect for human rights.

"The international community must ensure that UNMIL is provided as quickly as possible with resources needed to implement its mandate to protect and promote human rights in Liberia," Amnesty International concluded.

Tessa Kordeczka, Amnesty International's researcher in London, and Yvonne Terlingen, Amnesty International's Representative at the United Nations, will be glad to provide further information.

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