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Sierra Leone: Mary Robinson's visit to Freetown – placing human rights centre stage

The visit by the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights to Freetown on 24 and 25 June 1999 provides an excellent opportunity to encourage the inclusion of human rights at every stage of efforts to meet the political, humanitarian, peace-keeping and reconstruction needs of Sierra Leone, Amnesty International said today.

In a letter to Mary Robinson, the organization writes that “the human rights challenges facing Sierra Leone remain great and this visit should encourage a coherent and concerted approach to human rights by the various UN departments and agencies responding to the immediate and longer-term needs of Sierra Leone”.

The UN Secretary-General has described one of the purposes of the High Commissioner's visit as obtaining “tangible commitments regarding the prevention of abuses and accountability of perpetrators”.

“Despite the cease-fire and continuing peace negotiations, the risk of a resumption of hostilities and further killings, mutilations, rape and abductions remains. This is an opportunity for Mary Robinson to repeat her public condemnation of atrocities against civilians and to call on rebel

leaders to respect international humanitarian law,” Amnesty International said.

The High Commissioner will also be able to raise with the government and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) commanders measures to ensure that their forces also respect human rights.

“We are concerned that the peace agreement under negotiation in Lomé may, as in Abidjan in 1996, prevent those who have been overwhelmingly responsible for gross human rights abuses from being brought to justice,” Amnesty International said, adding that “the victims’ right to truth, justice and reparation must be taken into account”.

Mary Robinson’s visit will draw attention to the suffering of civilians who have borne the brunt of atrocities. Her visit will underline the specific needs of children, including former child combatants, affected by the conflict. It also provides an opportunity to support and encourage the government’s commitment to demobilize and end recruitment of children under the age of 18 years.

Impartial monitoring and reporting of human rights abuses must continue, including during implementation of an eventual peace agreement. The human rights section of the UN Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL) must have adequate resources and support to continue its activities, including reporting human rights abuses and training and support for national human rights groups.

There is a committed, active and able human rights movement in Sierra Leone which has endured exceptionally difficult circumstances. Amnesty International welcomes this opportunity for Mary Robinson to

provide support, solidarity and encouragement to all those working for the protection and respect of human rights in Sierra Leone.

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For more information on Sierra Leone please call Amnesty International's press office in London on: + 44 171 413 5566 or visit our website at www.amnesty.org