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SIERRA LEONE: A DECISIVE TIME TO PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights in Sierra Leone are at a decisive point, following the return of a civilian government and progress towards a negotiated settlement to five years of internal armed conflict, Amnesty International said today.

The organization called on the government, the armed opposition and the international community to take concrete steps to halt the killings and torture of civilians, which are continuing despite the peace negotiations, and to lay solid foundations for respect of human rights in the future.

“The opportunities for securing a durable peace and sustained respect and protection of human rights in Sierra Leone must not be lost,” Amnesty International said. “Otherwise, the chances of lasting peace in Sierra Leone will be seriously undermined.”

“The inclusion of provisions for the protection of human rights in the draft peace accord is an important and positive development but action to stop torture and killings cannot wait for the implementation of a final agreement.”

Despite peace negotiations and a cease-fire, deliberate killings, torture and mutilation of civilians continue, while hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people and refugees are still unable to return home. Women, children and the elderly continue to be among the victims of the violence. Effective monitoring of human rights is needed now.

In a report published today Amnesty International details killings and torture committed by both government soldiers and the armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF). A delegation from the human rights organization visited the country earlier this year and spoke to many of the victims.

Some of the worst atrocities occurred in the weeks leading up to the elections in February, when Sierra Leoneans, determined to vote for a civilian government, defied intimidation and terror from both sides. The identity of the perpetrators often remained unclear as there was usually little, if any, distinction in the appearance and behaviour of the armed groups involved.

A seven-year-old boy, Lahai Bockarie, had his right leg deliberately cut off during an attack on the village of Komende in the south of the country in February. His parents, two brothers and two sisters were killed; his mother, who was eight months pregnant, had her throat cut. Other victims had their hands, arms, ears or lips cut off, or slogans denouncing the elections carved into their backs or chests.

Since May there has been an upsurge in violence, particularly in the south and east of the country. On 10 May soldiers killed up to 100 civilians in the village of Gondama in Kamajei Chiefdom; some of the victims were decapitated. Many others were seriously wounded, suffering gun-shot wounds and severe lacerations from machetes. Some 15 people were captured, forced to carry looted goods and subsequently killed.

Also in May, an 18-year-old girl, repeatedly raped by armed men in the village of Mendema, Bagbe Chiefdom, subsequently died from a pelvic infection. In early July, three women from the village of Monseneh, Mano Sa Krim Chiefdom, died after having sticks inserted into their vaginas. The entire village was burned and property looted.

“The government has stressed the need for reconciliation in achieving peace,” Amnesty International said. “True reconciliation, however, cannot be achieved if the right of victims and their families to truth and justice are ignored. There should be no general amnesties providing impunity to those responsible for the torture and killings.”

Amnesty International’s 37-page report, *Sierra Leone: Towards a future founded on human rights*, makes concrete recommendations to the Government of Sierra Leone, to the RUF and to the international community to build on commitments to respect human rights. These include:

- The immediate establishment of a human rights verification commission, with the support and participation of the international community. It should include international human rights observers with the expertise and credibility necessary to effectively monitor human rights while the peace agreement is being implemented.
- Effective control should be exerted over both government soldiers and RUF forces, and instructions should be given that killings and torture of non-combatants will not be tolerated under any circumstances.
- The mandate of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, set up by the government in July, should be expanded to clarify the truth about human rights abuses -- by government soldiers and rebel forces -- during the conflict. The commission should make recommendations for bringing those responsible for human rights abuses to justice and also for measures to prevent abuses in the future.
- The independence and impartiality of the National Commission on Human Rights proposed in the draft peace agreement must be guaranteed and its findings made public. The work of the commission should go hand in hand with strengthening the independence of the judiciary as well as reform of the military and police force.

All sectors of Sierra Leonean society, as well as the international community, have important roles to play in ensuring that human rights are respected and protected in the future, Amnesty International said.

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