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PUBLIC STATEMENT

Amnesty International visits Sierra Leone

Two Amnesty International representatives will visit Sierra Leone from 14 to 27 May to obtain detailed information about the human rights situation in the country.

The period of rule of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), joined by the armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF), following the military coup in May 1997 was characterized by gross human rights abuses, including torture and killing of unarmed civilians. These abuses have continued and worsened as the AFRC and RUF have retreated from Freetown towards the east of the country after being forced from power by West African troops, known as ECOMOG, in mid-February.

In a report published in October 1997 -- *Sierra Leone: A disastrous set-back for human rights* -- Amnesty International documented some of the many cases of arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and ill-treatment and deliberate killings by the AFRC and RUF. Amnesty International repeatedly called for an end to these abuses. Since October, and, in particular since the AFRC and RUF were removed from power, the catalogue of abuses has become horrific.

The AFRC and RUF have killed, tortured and raped as they have retreated through Bo, Kenema, Lunsar and Makeni and other towns and surrounding villages. In April, as ECOMOG forces advanced towards Koidu, in Kono District, in the east, the AFRC and RUF deliberately killed and mutilated unarmed civilians. More than a hundred victims with their arms, feet or ears cut off, or suffering from bullet or machete wounds, have been brought to Connaught Hospital in Freetown.

Amnesty International's representatives will meet officials of the government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah and a range of other people, including members of the military, the legal profession and non-governmental human rights organizations. The representatives are Dr Stephen Ellis, director of the African Studies Centre at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, and Teresa Kordeczka, a staff member of the International Secretariat of Amnesty International.

It is a critical time in Sierra Leone for rebuilding the country and laying the foundations for a secure and peaceful future. Effective institutions and mechanisms for protecting and respecting human rights -- such as an efficient and independent judiciary, a well trained and disciplined police force and army, and an independent human rights commission -- must be established.

It is also essential to ensure that there is accountability for the atrocities which have been committed in Sierra Leone, both since Sierra Leone's internal armed conflict began in 1991 and also while the AFRC and RUF were in power. There should be proper investigations into these

abuses and those responsible brought to justice. Reconciliation and peace in Sierra Leone cannot be achieved if the right of victims and their families to truth and justice are ignored.

Since the AFRC was removed from power in February more than 1,500 people suspected of supporting or collaborating with the AFRC have been detained; 59 of them had been charged with treason, some also with other offences including murder, by the end of April. Those charged should be given a fair trial, in accordance with international standards, and without recourse to the death penalty. Anyone among the many hundreds of people who remain held who is not to be charged should be released.

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