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EMBARGOED UNTIL 29 NOVEMBER 1999

African Children's Charter: a welcome step to securing the rights of Africa's children

The entry into force of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Children's Charter), within days of the 10th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, is another positive step towards securing the protection of children's rights, Amnesty International said today.

"The human rights of African children are violated every day of their lives, with severe consequences which extend well beyond their childhood," Amnesty International said.

"The African Children's Charter provides a basis for the promotion and protection of the rights of children at the national and regional level."

The Charter -- the first regional treaty on the human rights of the child -- was adopted by the Organization of African Unity in 1990. However, member states have been slow to ratify the treaty, and it was not until last month that the fifteenth country ratified the Charter, thereby allowing the treaty to enter into force.

The African Children's Charter codifies the responsibilities of the state, community and individual in the protection of the civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights of the child.

Amnesty International has continued to document abuses of children's rights in a number of African countries -- including the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda -- perpetrated by both governments and armed opposition groups. Such abuses include torture and ill-treatment, rape, extrajudicial and arbitrary executions, "disappearances" and abductions, participation in armed conflicts, and permanent injuries sustained by children as a result of anti-personnel landmines.

It is estimated that 120,000 children under 18 years of age are participating in armed conflicts in the region, some as young as 7 and 8 years of age. Governments which ratify the African Children's Charter will be bound to ensure that no-one under the age of 18 is recruited into the armed forces or participates in hostilities.

States parties will be required to submit reports to an 11-member African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (the Committee), who will monitor compliance with the African Children's Charter. The Committee will be empowered to receive complaints from any person, group or non-governmental organization recognized by the OAU relating to any matter covered by the treaty. It will also be able to resort to any appropriate method of investigating matters falling within the ambit of the treaty. The Committee is expected to be elected at the OAU Summit next June, in Lomé, Togo.

"Member states of the OAU should ensure that they nominate and appoint individuals who are independent and impartial and who have expertise in the area of children's rights," the organization urged.

"The OAU should also provide the Committee with sufficient resources so that it is able to begin functioning as quickly and as efficiently as possible."

Amnesty International urges the remaining 37 states of the 53 member OAU to ratify the African Children's Charter as quickly as possible.

Background

Those governments which have ratified the African Children's Charter are Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Niger, Senegal, Seychelles, Togo, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

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