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Sierra Leone: Mass rally in support of survivors of conflict's sexual violence

At a mass rally held in Makeni in the Northern Province of Sierra Leone today, Amnesty International members and hundreds of other local activists called on the newly elected government of Sierra Leone to commit to ensuring justice and full reparations for the tens of thousands of Sierra Leonean women who have been the victims of sexual violence.

The organization also released a 35-page report entitled "*Getting reparations right for survivors of sexual violence*," revealing the extent to which women are still stigmatized and suffering the after-effects of the sexual violence perpetrated during the conflict in Sierra Leone.

"The unimaginable brutality of violations committed against up to one third of Sierra Leone's women and girls, although well-documented, has still not been fully addressed by the government," said Tania Bernath, Amnesty International's researcher on Sierra Leone.

"For the women of Sierra Leone, the story is not over. They need appropriate healthcare and access to justice, work, economic opportunities and educational opportunities to help them to begin to re-build their lives."

Under international law, those responsible for rape, sexual slavery and sexual violence amounting to war crimes, crimes against humanity and torture must be brought to justice and the survivors must receive full and effective reparations. Reparations must, as far as possible, wipe out all consequences of the illegal act and re-establish the situation that would have, in all probability, existed had the act not been committed.

The Lomé Peace Accord, signed in 1999, provided for the establishment of a "Special Fund for War Victims" and for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Despite the government's obligation to establish such a fund and repeated calls from civil society, the fund has not been established.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission also called for the establishment of a reparations process. This is now being set up with the National Commission for Social Action taking the lead, but it will need the full support of the government to be effective.

"The delay in setting up a special fund for war victims of Sierra Leone's devastating conflict has undoubtedly resulted in further suffering -- especially for the women of Sierra Leone," said Bernath. "Survivors of sexual violence have been denied rehabilitation -- extending their suffering and compounding their physical and psychological problems."

"Implementing the reparations program recommended by the TRC is also crucial and it will be important for the government to get it right so the survivors of sexual violence do not miss out on the much needed reparations"

Amnesty International stressed in its report that the justice process is an important complement to other forms of reparations.

"A properly functioning justice system should enable survivors to describe what has happened to them in an environment that protects their dignity and helps to end impunity for the horrific crimes they have suffered -- holding the perpetrators to account and bringing them to justice."

"It is almost six years since the end of the devastating conflict that wracked Sierra Leone for years, causing immeasurable suffering to civilians in the country -- particularly women," said Bernath. "And yet, the suffering for women has not ended. The lack of justice and effective remedies has to a certain extent set the stage for further violence against women. "

Despite the passage of several women's rights bills, violations of women's rights in Sierra Leone continue unabated. Not only is violence against women and girls rampant, but efforts to prosecute perpetrators have been largely ineffective.

"Family mediation aimed at restoring 'peace' in rape cases contributes to impunity -- rather than furthering justice," said Bernath. "Such mediation facilitates the government evading its responsibility to ensure that all violence against women is prosecuted."

Background

There has been little justice for survivors of war-related sexual violence in Sierra Leone. On 20 June 2007 the Special Court for Sierra Leone found three senior members of the AFRC guilty of 11 out of 14 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity. These included rape and outrages on personal dignity including sexual slavery. Remarkably, this was the first instance of anyone in Sierra Leone being held to account for war-related crimes. While this is a significant step forward in the fight against impunity, it is only a small and partial response to addressing impunity for these crimes, since thousands of others have escaped justice.

However an amnesty clause in the Lomé Accord bars prosecution of anyone accused of committing war crimes, crimes against humanity and other crimes between 1991 and 1999. The amnesty also precludes victims from seeking reparations from perpetrators in Sierra Leone's national courts.

Amnesty International continues to call on the government of Sierra Leone to revoke its amnesty law as a matter of urgency and to prioritize rebuilding the justice system in order to effectively investigate all crimes committed during the conflict and prosecute those suspected to committing the crimes.

To see a full copy of the report *Sierra Leone: Getting reparations right for survivors of sexual violence*, please go to: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf510052007>

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