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Liberia: One year after Accra, immense human rights challenges remain

Hopes were raised on 18 August last year that Liberia's protracted human rights crisis would finally end but major challenges remain, Amnesty International said today in a new report.

"The Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in Accra augured well for the Liberian people who had suffered more than a decade of appalling human rights abuses. But one year later, despite some major advances, progress towards ensuring protection of human rights is disappointingly slow," the organization said.

Amnesty International representatives visited Liberia last month to gauge the impact of the peace agreement, deployment of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and promises made at the International Reconstruction Conference on Liberia in February. Steady advances in deployment of UNMIL forces and disarmament and demobilization have undoubtedly resulted in improvements.

"We certainly witnessed an improvement to the situation we found in Liberia last November when civilians continued to be subjected to killings, rape, beatings, forced labour and looting," Amnesty International said. "In less accessible areas, however, where an effective UNMIL presence has yet to be established and disarmament and demobilization have not yet started, civilians remain at risk."

Harassment, intimidation, extortion, forced labour and looting are reported to continue in Lofa County, still controlled by forces of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), and in the south-eastern counties of Sinoe, Grand Kru, River Gee and Maryland, where forces of the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) still hold sway. In Nimba County, where former government and MODEL forces remain, civilians still feel threatened and restricted, unable to move freely and harassed for food and other possessions.

"UNMIL forces should vigorously implement their Chapter VII mandate to protect civilians," Amnesty International said.

"At the same time, the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL), which includes representatives of the former government, LURD and MODEL, also has responsibilities," Amnesty International added. "They made a commitment when they signed the peace agreement to promote full respect for international humanitarian law and human rights, but we have heard little or no condemnation by the NTGL of the conduct of those they represent."

Liberian civil society gave a strong and unwavering message to Amnesty International that impunity for crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law must end. There was no doubting that failure to address impunity in the past had resulted in continuing abuses and had also prolonged the conflict: "*impunity is the propelling force of the conflict*", as a Liberian non-governmental organization correctly and concisely put it.

"The international community and the NTGL should state categorically that there can be no impunity for crimes against humanity and war crimes and that the perpetrators will be brought to justice," Amnesty International said.

As Liberia emerges only falteringly from a human rights crisis, protection of human rights - in the immediate and longer term - has to be a priority. The UNMIL Human Rights and Protection Section has developed an ambitious and comprehensive programme of work but remains without its full complement of staff and necessary funding.

"The full number of human rights officers must be recruited as quickly as possible in order to monitor and document the human rights situation throughout the country," Amnesty International said. "We need to see regular - and, most importantly, public - reporting by UNMIL of the human rights situation."

Similarly, the UNMIL Senior Gender Adviser and Gender Unit lack the resources needed to ensure that protection of the rights of women and girls permeate the entire UNMIL operation and is fully taken into account as Liberia tries to deal with the terrible legacy of conflict.

"The high incidence of rape and other forms of sexual violence during the conflict demands an adequate response to the needs of those who have suffered sexual violence and also to effective protection of the fundamental rights of women and girls in post-conflict Liberia," Amnesty International said.

Child protection agencies have also expressed serious concerns about shortcomings in the disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR) of children associated with fighting forces.

Acute frustration is being expressed by Liberian civil society, UNMIL and other UN agencies, national and international non-governmental organizations that the generous pledges made at the International Reconstruction Conference have not been matched by disbursement of funds. This is seriously impeding implementation of plans to establish the mechanisms and institutions needed to protect human rights.

"The Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL) told us: '*We had high hopes in Accra, but it seems that we are in the same boat... If the system doesn't work, we can't do anything*'."

Donor countries must urgently fulfil pledges made in February but the NTGL is also part of the equation. Unless it shows steadfast commitment to the peace agreement and post-conflict reconstruction based on good governance, the rule of law and respect for human rights, the confidence, support and goodwill of the international community will be quickly eroded.

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