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ORAL STATEMENT

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Agenda Item 5(ii): Activity Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa

Honourable Special Rapporteur

Amnesty International welcomes the Protocol on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa that came into force on 4 November 2024, and which gives states the obligation to "adopt legislative or other measures" to eliminate discrimination against older persons.

Belief in witchcraft remains deeply rooted in many African communities, including in Ghana, where individuals accused of witchcraft, primarily older women, are often forced to live in isolated camps in the North of the country. Amnesty International's recent research highlights how such accusations have led to serious human rights violations. Many of the accused are subjected to social exclusion, threats, and violence, and are compelled to reside in informal settlements under difficult and degrading conditions. Amnesty International has documented the situation in four such camps, which collectively house over 500 individuals, most of them older women.

Accusations of witchcraft often follow personal tragedies, such as illness or death, or arise from envy and struggle over economic resources. The accused are typically among the most marginalised, facing intersecting forms of discrimination due to gender, age, poverty, disability, health conditions, or lack of education. Women who are perceived as defying gender norms, are unmarried, childless, economically independent, or are widows without adult sons, are disproportionately targeted. Accusations frequently originate from family members and often escalate into violence, including killings. Many survivors are forced to flee, with nowhere to turn but these informal camps.

Our research shows that such incidents are rarely reported to the police, and even when they are, they are not systematically investigated. This stems from a combination of fear, stigma, and lack of awareness about legal rights among affected people. The absence of specific legislation addressing witchcraft accusations and the lack of a national sensitisation campaign to combat this harmful practice severely undermine the rights to life and security of those accused. The state has also failed to provide safe, state-run shelters, forcing victims to depend on camps overseen by traditional priests, where many remain indefinitely.

Access to food, safe housing, and clean water is severely limited in those camps. The residents often rely on informal farm work or donations. Although the government provides a cash transfer programme, many are not registered, and payments, when received, are often delayed and inadequate. Piped water is unavailable, forcing women to trek long distances through mountainous terrain to fetch water. While many possess national health insurance, they must pay out of pocket for medicines not covered, which they can rarely afford to.

Amnesty International urges the African Commission to call on the Ghanaian authorities to enact legislation criminalising witchcraft accusations and ritual abuses, incorporating protective measures for those at risk. We also urge the Commission to integrate the issue of witchcraft-related abuses in the review of state reports and broader human rights monitoring in Africa.

Thank you.