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LIBERIA: EXECUTIONS ARE NOT AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO ADDRESS HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

Last week's execution of at least four Liberian Peace Council (LPC) commanders by firing squad does nothing to break the cycle of Liberia's long history of human rights abuses, Amnesty International said today

"By executing four of its top commanders for past human rights abuses, they are clearly sending the wrong signal -- if the long-standing disregard for human rights is to be reversed, justice not further human rights abuses is needed," the organization said.

Amnesty International is urging that the death penalty should not be used under any circumstances. It believes that the execution of LPC commanders following summary proceedings violates the right to life, to physical integrity and to a fair trial.

The executions of the LPC commanders were carried out on 14 November 1995 for past human rights abuses. They were ordered by a specially constituted court reportedly after a two week investigation into a wide range of abuses against civilians during the war which has ravaged Liberia since 1989. The court had been set up by the LPC, one of the armed factions involved in the war. The leader of the LPC, George Boley, has been a member of the Council of State, the Liberian joint presidency, since September 1995.

In September 1995 Amnesty International launched a public appeal to all the factions in the Liberian conflict to seize the opportunity of the peace agreement reached in Abuja, Nigeria, in August to take immediate steps to eliminate and prevent torture, unlawful killings and other human rights abuses. The organization also urged that those suspected of committing abuses should be held accountable for their activities and should be removed from a position of command or where they could commit further abuses.

Amnesty International believes that investigating human rights abuses is an important step towards ending impunity and breaking the cycle of violence in Liberia. However, if respect for human rights is to be restored, it must be done in accordance with international standards.

"Authorities involved in investigating human rights abuses and other criminal activities should not demand the death penalty which is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment," Amnesty International said. "The death penalty, which has no special proven deterrent effect, can only further brutalise those involved."

Amnesty International is urging that any future investigations are carried out by an independent and impartial judicial body and those suspected of committing human rights abuses are referred to the state prosecuting authorities. Suspects must be offered guarantees for a fair trial as provided for in Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Liberia

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has signed. It is important that all those detained in this connection are protected against torture, allowed adequate access to lawyers and any court hearings are held in public with defence counsel.
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