

0001 hrs gmt Wednesday 29 April 1992

SIERRA LEONE: @HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN A HIDDEN WAR ZONE

Amnesty International representatives just back from Sierra Leone have uncovered serious human rights abuses in a hidden and brutal civil war.

"There is an unreported war going on in Sierra Leone," said the human rights organization, "and while the world is looking elsewhere, human rights are being violated on a large scale. Unarmed civilians are being extrajudicially executed, tortured and held incommunicado. No one really knows the extent of the abuses."

The Amnesty International representatives travelled to the south and east of Sierra Leone, an area which a few months ago was in the thick of the fighting. Now, government forces have pushed back the rebels but there is still a real fear that both army and rebels are abusing human rights in the current war zone.

"It is almost impossible to say for certain what is happening there right now," said Amnesty International, "because information is always sketchy from areas of combat. But we do know now what happened in the areas recently affected by the war - and we are afraid the same is happening at the present front line."

In March 1991 an invasion force entered Sierra Leone from the part of Liberia controlled by the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), headed by Charles Taylor. Led by the NPFL, it included Sierra Leonean opponents of the government of President Joseph Saidu Momoh, head of the one-party state in Sierra Leone. The invaders captured towns and villages in the Southern and Eastern Provinces, killing hundreds of people who refused to help them. Since then, the rebels and the armed forces of Sierra Leone, helped by friendly governments, have been locked in combat. In late 1991, the government of Sierra Leone reportedly announced that anyone found behind rebel lines would be considered rebels.

As the government forces have been recapturing towns and villages, the army has reportedly been holding "kangaroo courts" and executing anyone suspected of joining or assisting the invasion force. Villagers have been asked to point out rebels and collaborators. If these suspects could produce no witnesses to vouch for them, they were taken away and shot, usually in public. There is no legal basis for these "courts" and no chance for any detainee to defend themselves properly.

Suspects have been tortured or ill-treated, by being bound tightly, severely beaten and sometimes bayoneted or mutilated. A small proportion of the suspected rebels have been detained in the capital, Freetown, without charge or trial, in life-threatening prison conditions. Several were wounded but received no medication, and some are reported to have died as a result of wounds, malnutrition and medical neglect.

In some cases, people still being held in Freetown had apparently been falsely denounced, for example by business rivals. One woman and her two children were detained because she was believed to be the wife of a rebel leader.

The rebel forces have also been responsible for major human rights abuses, including killings and torture. The invasion force slaughtered scores of civilians, particularly government supporters such as traditional chiefs and Muslim businessmen.

"Both sides in this war have been responsible for human rights abuses in recent months," said Amnesty International. "We fear that killings of civilians and prisoners are still taking place at the front line, out of sight of the outside world.

"Even in a time of war, there is no excuse for violations of this sort. We are calling on the government to halt the killings and to order an immediate, impartial inquiry into all reports of killings and torture by government forces. The government must also regulate and record the detention and interrogation of suspected rebels and collaborators."

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 HRS GMT WEDNESDAY 20 APRIL 1992