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## **Sierra Leone: escalating human rights crisis requires urgent action**

Respect and protection of human rights must be at the centre of all efforts to end the crisis in Sierra Leone, Amnesty International said today, adding that "the imperative to end the fighting must not be at the expense of establishing accountability for human rights abuses."

Intense political activity is now taking place to try to resolve the crisis in Sierra Leone and to bring an end to the fighting in Freetown. The international community -- including the United Nations (UN), the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the Economic Community of West African States, the Commonwealth and the European Union -- has committed itself to contributing to peace and security in Sierra Leone.

"The international community's commitment to resolve the crisis must include initiatives to end the gross human rights abuses perpetrated by rebel forces, prevent further violations and lay solid foundations for the protection of human rights in the future," Amnesty International added.

The organization regrets that the OAU has missed the opportunity to ensure that human rights are at the centre of discussions on Sierra Leone by postponing the OAU Ministerial Conference on Human Rights scheduled to take place in Mauritius later this month. The OAU should nevertheless urgently convene a heads of state level meeting of the Central Organ of its conflict resolution mechanism in order to address the human rights crisis in Sierra Leone.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned about reports that children and young people have been abducted by rebel forces in Freetown and forced to join their ranks.

Civilians in Freetown have been deliberately and arbitrarily killed by rebel forces and have also been caught in hostilities between the West African force deployed in Sierra Leone, known as ECOMOG, and rebel forces of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

"Rebel forces must respect international humanitarian law and end the gross human rights abuses which they are perpetrating against unarmed civilians," Amnesty International urged.

"ECOMOG forces must at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants and take all necessary measures to protect civilians from the dangers arising from military operations," the organization added. "Civil Defence Forces fighting alongside ECOMOG must also respect international humanitarian law."

The UN Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL) -- the peace-keeping operation established by the UN Security Council in July 1998 -- has been forced to evacuate from Freetown

to Conakry in neighbouring Guinea. It is essential, however, that UNOMSIL human rights officers, who have been effectively monitoring and reporting human rights abuses and contributing to the long-term protection of human rights, continue their work. "Sierra Leone continues to face a human rights emergency," Amnesty International added.

The Security Council on Tuesday extended UNOMSIL's mandate for another two months. "The activities of the human rights component of UNOMSIL must be fully supported, both politically and financially, by the international community," Amnesty International said.

Liberia has been widely reported to be providing combatants, arms and ammunition to rebel forces in Sierra Leone. In view of the appalling level of violence against civilians which continues to characterize the conflict in Sierra Leone, Amnesty International believes that all military assistance to rebel forces will result in continuing violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.

"All government should take all possible measures to end immediately military assistance to those committing human rights abuses in Sierra Leone," the organization said.

The international community has strongly condemned continuing support to rebel forces in Sierra Leone. Following a visit to Sierra Leone and Liberia in December, the chairman of the Security Council sanctions committee on Sierra Leone, Hans Dahlgren, said that arms and ammunition were crossing the Sierra Leonean border with neighbouring countries, including Liberia.

It has become increasingly difficult to obtain information from Freetown since telephone communications ceased on 7 January. Although mounting daily, the exact number of civilian casualties since rebel forces entered Freetown on 6 January is unknown.

The people of Freetown have been trapped and unable to escape the violence. They have been unable to leave their homes to obtain food. There is extensive looting and destruction of property. Food supplies and vehicles of humanitarian agencies have been looted.

"Humanitarian agencies must be allowed to assist civilians in Freetown without threats to their safety and security," Amnesty International said.

**In a report published in November 1998, *Sierra Leone: 1998 - a year of atrocities against civilians* (AI Index: AFR 51/22/98), Amnesty International described in detail the widespread atrocities -- killings, mutilations, rape -- which have been committed by rebel forces, after they were forced from power by ECOMOG in February 1998.**

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