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## **Sierra Leone: UN human rights presence reduced as abuses worsen**

Plans to reduce the size of the United Nations (UN) peace-keeping mission in Sierra Leone when civilians continue to suffer appalling atrocities are unacceptable, Amnesty International said.

According to information received by the organization, the UN plans to reduce from five to only two or three the number of human rights monitors in the UN Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL).

"At a time when it is more urgent than ever to monitor human rights abuses in Sierra Leone and to report them accurately and impartially, the UNOMSIL human rights section is being weakened dramatically" Amnesty International said. "Despite the difficulties posed by the security situation in Freetown, there is still much that UNOMSIL human rights officers can do."

Retreating through the east of Freetown this week, rebel forces have again resorted to mutilating civilians by cutting off their hands and arms. On 18 January, rebel forces were reported to have taken 12 people from a mosque in the east of Freetown and then either killed them or amputated their limbs.

Dozens of people with amputated limbs are now arriving in the centre of Freetown. Some 30 people with amputations have been admitted this week to the Netland Hospital, which was supported by the International Committee of the Red Cross until the remaining international staff were ordered by the government to leave Freetown last week. Others have gone to Connaught Hospital. Neither hospital is able to cope with the thousands of people who have been injured and killed since 6 January.

After rebel forces entered Freetown on 6 January UNOMSIL evacuated to Conakry in neighbouring Guinea. On 12 January the UN Security Council extended UNOMSIL's mandate for a further two months. While it was expected that the number of UNOMSIL military observers would be reduced, neither the UN Secretary-General nor the Security Council resolution extending UNOMSIL's mandate recommended scaling down the human rights section.

On 14 January Amnesty International stressed that it was essential that UNOMSIL human rights officers continue their work and publicly called on the international community to support, both politically and financially, the human rights section, which has been effective in monitoring and reporting human rights abuses and which has contributed to the long-term protection of human rights in Sierra Leone.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International is receiving daily reports of atrocities committed by rebel forces. Since they entered Freetown rebel forces have deliberately and arbitrarily killed hundreds of unarmed civilians. Eleven policemen were killed at the ancient Cotton Tree in the heart of Freetown. Rebel forces arrived in Freetown with lists of people to be targeted, including members of the National Commission for Democracy and Human Rights. Lawyers and journalists also appear to have been deliberately sought and killed. When rebel forces went to the home of a lawyer in Freetown and failed to find him, they shot his mother.

Large numbers of civilians, including children and young people, have been abducted in Freetown by rebel forces. Some have been used as porters to carry looted goods from Freetown to other parts of the country. Girls and women have been raped.

The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Freetown and at least 13 foreign nationals, who include seven priests and six nuns, were last week abducted by rebel forces from Kissy in the east of Freetown. Their fate and whereabouts remain unknown.

ECOMOG and Civil Defence Forces (CDF) fighting alongside them have summarily executed captured rebels or people they suspect of supporting rebel forces. ECOMOG forces summarily executed 22 captives on Aberdeen Bridge on 13 January and similar executions are reported to be continuing. Indiscriminate aerial bombardments on areas of the densely populated capital have resulted in large numbers of civilian casualties. Last week the CDF summarily executed six young men alleged to have been rebels at Kingtom in Freetown.

Eight Sierra Leonean humanitarian aid workers are currently being held by ECOMOG, accused of cooperating with rebel forces. Most of them are reported to have been beaten while detained.

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