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Sierra Leone: United Nations Security Council must ensure the protection of civilians

The United Nations Security Council must ensure that the protection of the human rights of all Sierra Leoneans is at the centre of its efforts to respond swiftly and decisively to the current crisis, Amnesty International said today in a letter faxed to all members of the Security Council.

"UNAMSIL, as the largest UN peace-keeping operation in the world, and particularly given the appalling history of human rights abuses in Sierra Leone over the last nine years, must serve as an example of the integration of human rights into all aspects of a peace-keeping operation," Amnesty International said.

Fulfilment of UNAMSIL's mandate to protect civilians

"Before the current crisis the gradual deployment of UN peace-keeping troops in areas of the north and east of Sierra Leone still effectively under the control of rebel forces, had a positive impact on reducing the incidence of human rights abuses against civilians," Amnesty International said. "The UNAMSIL peace-keeping operation needs to be provided with a clearer mandate to protect the human rights of all civilians at all times and not just those under imminent threat of physical violence -- as currently mandated."

Amnesty International is urging the Security Council to provide a clearer mandate for the UNAMSIL peace-keeping operation to protect the human rights of all civilians at all times, and to ensure that UNAMSIL peace-keeping troops have the necessary training and logistical support to protect civilians throughout the country.

Impunity

"The viability of the peace agreement, signed in July 1999, was undermined from the outset by providing a blanket amnesty," said Amnesty International. "As an organization we opposed the amnesty because it violated international law and failed to end impunity for the gross human rights abuses, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, committed during the conflict."

The RUF has clearly failed to abide by the terms of the agreement which it signed. Neither RUF members nor anyone else should continue to benefit from the amnesty in that agreement. The killings, mutilations, rape and abductions which continued after the peace agreement was signed are, in any case, not covered by the amnesty and those responsible must be brought to justice.

Even if the amnesty is not annulled by the Sierra Leone government, the international community must comply with its obligations under international law to bring to justice those responsible for crimes under international law, including war crimes, crimes against humanity and torture. Any state may request the extradition of suspected perpetrators of gross human rights abuses, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, committed during the armed conflict for trial in its own courts. If the Sierra Leone government does not submit the cases of such suspects to its own courts, it must nevertheless comply with any extradition request, provided that it receives effective guarantees that the right to fair trial will be fully respected and that the death penalty will not be imposed.

The human rights organization stated that any such trial -- in Sierra Leone or any state requesting extradition -- must conform to international fair trial standards and not impose the death penalty.

Amnesty International is urging the Security Council to act decisively to end impunity and insist that all those responsible for human rights abuses, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, which have occurred during the internal armed conflict and since the signing of the peace agreement are brought to justice.

Military assistance to rebel forces

Despite the imposition of sanctions by the Security Council prohibiting the sale of arms and related matériel to rebel forces, it is clear that these measures are being violated.

Amnesty International is urging the Security Council to enforce the existing arms embargo on rebel forces in Sierra Leone in order to prevent military assistance reaching them, including by monitoring borders with neighbouring countries, undertaking a rigorous investigation into military assistance reaching rebel forces, identifying those found to be in breach of the arms embargo and taking appropriate action against them.

It is well known and documented that the sale of diamonds has fuelled the conflict in Sierra Leone since the trade continues to be controlled by the RUF. There have, however, been no measures taken by the Security Council to curb this trade despite the innovative work of the Council on diamond sanctions imposed in Angola against UNITA.

"The Security Council's sanctions committee on Sierra Leone must investigate the role of the trade in diamonds from areas under rebel control in the supply of military assistance to rebel forces," Amnesty International said.

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