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Liberia: Independent human rights monitors urgently needed as civilians are increasingly targeted in conflict

"The international community must take urgent and concrete steps to protect vulnerable populations from further human rights abuses," said Amnesty International today following a recent visit to Liberia where researchers found that civilians have become the main targets in the armed conflict in Lofa County.

The armed conflict, which last week reportedly spread to Gbopulu county between Liberian security forces and armed opposition groups based in Guinea, has been going on since early 1999. Amnesty International has documented continuing human rights abuses, including torture while in incommunicado detention, rape of women and girls, forced military recruitment of men and boys, and killings, going back to at least mid-2000.

In recent weeks, the targeting of civilians has become increasingly arbitrary, with all ethnic groups at risk. Previously, members of the Mandingo ethnic group were the primary targets and victims of human rights abuses.

Those responsible for these abuses include Liberian security forces -- the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU) and national police -- and armed opposition groups based in neighbouring Guinea. The Sierra Leone armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF), fighting alongside Liberian security forces, has also been responsible for human rights abuses against Liberian civilians.

Since the beginning of December 2001, government sources have reported large-scale killings and other attacks on civilians in Gbopulu county by “dissidents”. The main armed political group, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), has denied responsibility. There has been no independent confirmation of the large-scale killings.

Amnesty International is alarmed by the continuing lack of protection for civilians. Humanitarian agencies working in camps for internally displaced people (IDP) in Gbopulu county have had to leave temporarily due to the conflict. The lack of international presence in the camps raises urgent and serious concerns for IDP protection. Many families have become separated during their flight from Lofa county and there are large numbers of unaccompanied women and children in IDP camps. Liberian civilians and Sierra Leonean refugees in camps in Cape Mount county are also at risk.

During their visit in early November 2001, Amnesty International researchers found that no agency was exercising responsibility for ensuring the protection of civilians. The Liberian Reconstruction, Reconciliation and Resettlement Commission (LRRRC), an *ad hoc* governmental agency largely composed of former combatants, which is charged with the responsibility of co-ordinating humanitarian assistance to IDPs, has no mandate to provide protection.

The government has been hostile to any public criticism of its conduct, especially with regard to the behaviour and impunity of the security forces. It has failed to take the necessary steps to bring those suspected of being responsible for human rights abuses to justice.

Amnesty International is also making specific recommendations to all groups involved in the conflict in northern Lofa County and to the international community. These include a call to the Liberian government

to assist the National Human Rights Commission to work effectively and independently, including by giving it subpoena powers and necessary resources.

The organization urges the international community, including the United Nations (UN) and other humanitarian agencies working in Liberia, to organize a well-coordinated, committed and vocal effort to protect all vulnerable groups in Liberia.

"While growing international attention on Liberia is focussed on its role in supporting the RUF in the Sierra Leone armed conflict, there is an imperative need for concrete steps to be taken to protect Liberian civilians and to end the human rights abuses against them," Amnesty International said.

Furthermore, the UN should live up to its commitments articulated in the thematic Security Council resolutions related to the protection of civilians when it considers the new mandate for the UN Peace-building office in Liberia. This includes urgently deploying independent and impartial human rights monitors with clear authority to document and report publicly on human rights abuses against civilians. Amnesty International also urges the European Union to continue to put pressure through its consultation process on the Liberian government with regard to human rights record specifically focussed on impunity issues.

Given the current insecurity, the arbitrary nature of attacks, and the overall lack of protection for the civilian population, the governments hosting Liberian refugees, in particular Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Gambia, Guinea and Sierra Leone, should work closely with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to scrupulously observe the principle of non-refoulement, including by fully assessing the level of risk before anyone is forced to return.

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