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Sierra Leone: A month after the military coup, Amnesty International again calls for human rights to be respected

The new military rulers should respect and protect the fundamental human rights of all Sierra Leoneans, Amnesty International said today, one month after the government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was overthrown in a military coup.

The human rights organization is repeating its call made following the coup on 25 May to respect the right to life, the right not to be tortured or ill-treated, the right not to be arbitrarily detained and the right to a fair trial.

Among concerns already raised by Amnesty International directly with Major Johnny Paul Koroma, who heads the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), is the detention of at least 15 people who were arrested on 16 June, accused of conspiring to overthrow the AFRC.

“We fear that some of these people may be detained only because they opposed the military coup which brought the AFRC to power. If this is the case, they should be immediately and unconditionally released,” the human rights organization said.

If there is evidence of a criminal offence against any of those detained, they should be given a prompt and fair trial, with full rights of defence and the right to appeal to a higher court against conviction and sentence. There is concern that they will not receive a fair trial if tried before a military court.

Those arrested are civilians associated with President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah's government or his party, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), and senior military officers. They are reported to include Dr Sama S. Banya, Colonel K.E.S Boyah, Dauda Bundu, Colonel Tom Carew, Major Francis Gottor, Dr Abdul Jalloh, Dr Bockarie M. Kobba, Abu Aiah Koroma, Colonel R.Y. Koroma, Captain John Massaquoi, Abdullai Mustapha, Lieutenant-Colonel J.A.H. Tucker and Major Vandi Turay. At least two of those detained were reportedly physically assaulted by soldiers at the time of their arrest.

They are currently held at the Central Prison, in Pademba Road, Freetown, and have been denied visits. Amnesty International has called for them to be allowed immediate access to their families, lawyers and doctors.

Amnesty International is also concerned about killings by soldiers in operations to prevent and deter looting after announcements by the AFRC that looters would be shot on sight. Such killings appear to contravene international standards on the use of lethal force: intentional lethal use of firearms may only be made when strictly unavoidable to protect life. At least 10 people have been shot and killed by soldiers in Freetown; similar killings have been reported in the town of Bo, Southern Province.

The military coup has been strongly condemned both within Sierra Leone and also by the international community, including the United Nations, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the Commonwealth and the European Union. At its summit meeting in Harare earlier in the month, the OAU gave a mandate to West African states to take whatever action was

necessary, including military force, to restore the government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah.

Some 4,000 West African troops, predominantly Nigerian, are deployed in Freetown and on 2 June there was a bombardment from Nigerian warships anchored off Freetown. There have since been strenuous efforts by countries in the region to negotiate a solution; these are continuing. West African foreign ministers are due to meet in Conakry, Guinea, tomorrow.

“The international community, in searching for a solution to the crisis in Sierra Leone, must ensure that the protection of human rights is a first priority,” Amnesty International said.

Background

The military coup has resulted in uncertainty, insecurity and severe hardship. Fighting has been reported in Southern, Eastern and Northern Provinces between soldiers and combatants of the armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF), who have joined forces with the AFRC, and traditional hunters loyal to President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah.

Sierra Leoneans have once again had to abandon their homes: thousands have fled to Guinea and Gambia or become internally displaced since the coup. Following a peace agreement signed by the government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah and the RUF in November 1996, to end more than five years internal armed conflict, refugees and internally displaced people -- almost half of the population -- had begun to return to their homes to rebuild their lives.

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