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SIERRA LEONE: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR AN END TO HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN A WAR AGAINST CIVILIANS

The continuing conflict in Sierra Leone has developed into a campaign of terror aimed primarily at civilians. Unarmed civilians have been captured and held hostage, ill-treated and tortured, deliberately and arbitrarily killed, Amnesty International said in a report published today.

Thousands of civilians have died. Many more thousands have been uprooted from their homes and livelihoods and are facing severe food shortages and disease.

Amnesty International believes that the torture and deliberate and arbitrary killings of civilians can be stopped. Both government soldiers and rebel forces are responsible for these abuses. In its report, the organization recommends ways in which the government, leaders of rebel forces and the international community could act to end the abuses.

"Since 1994 government soldiers have been increasingly implicated in killings of unarmed civilians officially blamed on rebel forces," Amnesty International said. There has been no official inquiry into the death of prominent lawyer, Patrick P. B. Kebbie, who was shot dead on 25 December 1994 in Kenema in Eastern Province. Although the government claimed that he was killed in a rebel attack, there was strong evidence that government soldiers were responsible.

In many cases government soldiers were reported to have offered no protection to civilians against attacks by rebel forces. Government soldiers have also been responsible for the torture and summary executions of captured rebels and people suspected of assisting or collaborating with rebels. In September 1994 a suspected rebel detained by government soldiers in the village of Bongor, Bo District, in Southern Province died after his face, chest and abdomen were slashed with a knife. Witnesses of an attack on the town of Lunsar in Northern Province in January 1995 described the extrajudicial execution of two rebels captured by government soldiers; they were decapitated.

Rebel forces have also tortured and killed unarmed civilians. A woman from Koidu, Kono District, in Eastern Province, which was attacked by rebel forces on 29 April 1995, described how rebels killed her husband, her two sons, a pregnant woman and her two children and several young men. Her daughter received serious knife wounds to her back, shoulder and chest and also subsequently died. She and other women were raped.

During a rebel attack on the town of Port Loko in Northern Province on 8 June 1995, four people died in their homes which were set alight by rebel forces. At least another 20 civilians, including children, drowned in the river while trying to escape. More than one hundred people - including over 50 schoolboys and girls - were reported to have been abducted by rebel forces from Port Loko. Their whereabouts and fate remain unknown.

Amnesty International recognises that efforts are being made to seek a negotiated settlement to the conflict.

"Political negotiations on a resolution to the conflict or a return to civilian rule, to be effective and long-lasting, must take into account human rights abuses committed during the conflict. Steps should be taken to ensure that these abuses are stopped and those responsible brought to justice," the organization said.

"Any peace process should contain effective mechanisms to protect human rights."

Background information

The conflict between the Revolutionary United Front, led by Foday Sankoh, and government forces began in 1991. Insurgents, backed by a Liberian armed group, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, headed by Charles Taylor, launched an attack from Liberia with the apparent objective of ousting or destabilizing the government of President Joseph Saidu Momoh. However, it continued after the overthrow of President Momoh in a military coup in April 1992. The political objectives of the RUF were no longer clear.

The new government, the National Provisional Ruling Council, headed by Captain Valentine E.M. Strasser, announced its commitment to bringing the war to a speedy end. However, violence, in particular directed at unarmed civilians, has worsened since 1994 and spread throughout the country.
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