

SIERRA LEONE

The United Nations special conference on Sierra Leone: the protection of human rights must be a priority for the international community

On 30 July 1998 the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, will convene a special conference in New York to galvanize the international community's response to the political, humanitarian and human rights situation in Sierra Leone.

The meeting will bring together representatives of the Government of Sierra Leone, intergovernmental organizations, including the UN, the Organization of African Unity, the Economic Community of West African States - which played a key role in restoring the elected government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah in March 1998 - the European Union and the Commonwealth, as well as humanitarian organizations.

Continuing atrocities

The international community's commitment to bring peace and security to Sierra Leone and to assist in its reconstruction and rehabilitation must include initiatives which will help to stop the gross human rights abuses being perpetrated by the joint forces of the ousted Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and Revolutionary United Front (RUF), prevent further abuses and also lay solid foundations for the respect and protection of human rights in the future.

AFRC and RUF forces in the east and north of Sierra Leone are deliberately and arbitrarily killing and torturing unarmed civilians. A deliberate and systematic campaign of killing, rape and mutilation - called by the AFRC and RUF "*Operation no living thing*" - has emerged since April 1998.

Although the exact number of those killed in recent months is unknown, it is likely to be several thousand, many of them women and children. More than 200 people were killed during an attack on one village alone - Yifin, in Koinadugu District in Northern Province - in late April 1998. Many hundreds of men, women and children of all ages have suffered mutilation and crude amputations of their arms, legs, lips or ears, lacerations and gunshot wounds. Women and girls have been raped or suffered other forms of sexual assault. Survivors of attacks who manage to reach safety and medical assistance recount that many others from their villages were killed or fled into the bush, their fate unknown.

The UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Sergio Vieira de Mello, following a visit to Sierra Leone in June 1998, said that the brutal treatment of civilians by the AFRC and RUF was unlike anything he had seen in 29 years of humanitarian work: "*there are no words to condemn this sort of practice...*".

An Amnesty International delegation which visited Sierra Leone in May 1998 met some of the victims of these atrocities at Connaught Hospital in Freetown. One, a farmer aged 40 from the village of Badala, in Koinadugu District, had both hands cut off when the village was attacked on 3 May 1998. He had arrived at Connaught Hospital four days later. Another, a 15-year-old schoolboy from Koidu, in Kono District, Eastern Province, who had arrived at the hospital on 10 May 1998, had suffered severe lacerations to his right ankle in an attempted amputation. Almost 50 people with him had been killed when they were attacked on 1 May 1998.

Three young women survived an attack on the village of Boima in Bombali District, Northern Province, on 7 May 1998; one had a deep cut to her arm, the other two had been beaten all over their bodies. One of the women had witnessed the killing of several members of her family, including her children. Twelve people, including three of her children, died when their house was set alight. Another child, a girl aged three, was pulled from her back and cut with machetes.

Such gross and large-scale human rights abuses demand an immediate and forceful response from the international community. The UN Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL), the peace-keeping operation established by the UN Security Council on 13 July 1998 to monitor the military and security situation in Sierra Leone, must be given the necessary resources and political support to effectively monitor violations of international humanitarian and human rights law and to make its findings public. In approving resolution 1181 (1998) the Security Council expressed its grave concern about "*the loss of life and immense suffering undergone by the people of Sierra Leone ... as a result of continuing rebel attacks*". Effective monitoring and reporting should be an important part of the international community's response.

Monitoring and reporting human rights abuses

Measures taken by the UN so far to address the human rights situation in Sierra Leone, including UNOMSIL civilian staff to monitor and report on violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, should be supported and reinforced. The inclusion of reporting on human rights in the Fifth Report of the UN Secretary-General on the situation in Sierra Leone of 9 June 1998 is welcomed and should be developed further in future reports.

The extent of the atrocities in Sierra Leone requires an increased number of civilian staff with human rights expertise within UNOMSIL to report on human rights violations to the UN Secretary-General and the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

It is important that there are adequate resources for UNOMSIL human rights monitors to be deployed in those areas of the country, in particular Eastern and Northern Provinces, where human rights abuses are being perpetrated. Adequate protection must be provided in areas where their security might be at risk.

The special conference will specifically seek assistance from the international community for UNOMSIL and for the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants and child soldiers in Sierra Leone. Military observers deployed in Sierra Leone should also report, through explicit channels, to the UN Secretary-General and the High Commissioner for Human Rights any violations of international humanitarian and human rights law which they may witness or receive reliable information about.

Children caught in the violence

Children have been particular victims of the violence and brutality in Sierra Leone. As well as being deliberately and arbitrarily killed, mutilated and maimed, thousands of children have been and continue to be abducted by AFRC and RUF forces and forced to fight. Girls and women have been systematically raped and forced into sexual slavery.

Among the more than 350,000 Sierra Leoneans who have either become refugees in neighbouring countries or internally displaced since February 1998 are hundreds of unaccompanied children separated from their families as a result of the violence. Children are the most vulnerable to the acute hardship, disease and malnutrition faced by Sierra Leonean refugees and displaced people. During May and June 1998, 750 people, including children, were reported to have died of disease and malnutrition at Masingbi, in Tonkolili District, Northern Province, where some 15,000 displaced people have sought safety.

The Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Olara Otunnu, following a visit to Sierra Leone in May 1998, challenged the international community to respond in a more vigorous and concerted way to the needs of children affected by the conflict in Sierra Leone. In June 1998 the UN Security Council, condemning the abduction, sexual abuse and recruitment and use in hostilities of children, said that it would pay serious attention to the situation of children affected by armed conflict. The needs of children in Sierra Leone are critical. Amnesty International welcomes the work of the Special Representative and endorses his call for Sierra Leone to be made one of the pilot projects for a more effective response in the context of post-conflict peace-building.

Effective institutions for the protection of human rights

Amnesty International urges the participants at the special conference on Sierra Leone, including the UN and international financial institutions, to work closely together to promote post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation which is based on good governance and respect for human rights. The police and army need to be restructured and trained, including in human rights; the legal and judicial systems need to be reformed and strengthened. The international community should assist in creating effective institutions for the protection and respect for human rights, including an independent national commission for human rights.

Ending impunity

Impunity contributes to continuing patterns of human rights abuses. Peace and security in Sierra Leone will not be achieved until there is an end to impunity. It is only when those responsible for human rights abuses are brought to justice for their crimes that a clear message is sent that gross human rights abuses will not be tolerated or allowed to go unpunished.

Amnesty International strongly endorses the joint statement in June 1998, shortly after the conference on the creation of a permanent international criminal court opened in Rome, by the heads of five UN agencies - UNICEF, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs - that the atrocities being committed in Sierra Leone are a brutal reminder of the urgent need for an international criminal court to bring to trial those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The delegation of Sierra Leone to the diplomatic conference in Rome repeatedly cited the experience of its country as evidence of the need for the establishment of a permanent international criminal court. The international community must assist in establishing accountability for the atrocities in Sierra Leone in order to combat impunity and to bring justice, and also to contribute to lasting peace in Sierra Leone.

KEYWORDS: UN1 / ARMED CONFLICT1 / CHILDREN / WOMEN / INDISCRIMINATE KILLINGS / IMPUNITY / OAU
--