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Sierra Leone: Rape and other forms of sexual violence must be stopped

Abduction, rape and sexual slavery of girls and women in Sierra Leone must be stopped, says Amnesty International in a new report released today. These practices have been among the most abhorrent and distressing features of the nine-year internal armed conflict in Sierra Leone.

Rape, sexual slavery and other forms of sexual violence by rebel forces have been systematic and widespread, notes the human rights organization which is making specific recommendations to all the forces involved and the wider international community.

Thousands of women of all ages have been raped and abducted. Often they have been forced to become the sexual partner or a wife of combatants. Beyond the brutality and trauma of rape itself, sexual assault can result in serious physical injury, forced pregnancy, disease and even death. The terror wreaked by rebel forces on civilians has also included men being forced to rape members of their own family under threat of being mutilated by having their hands or arms cut off.

Despite the peace agreement signed in Lomé, Togo, in July 1999 between the government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), human rights abuses against civilians, including rape and other forms of sexual violence, have continued. Renewed insecurity and fighting since May have further aggravated the incidence of rape. In mid-May rebel forces from the RUF raped and abducted girls and women in the area around Masiaka, some 40 kilometres from the capital Freetown. Among the victims was a woman in her twenties, with a five-month old baby, who was abducted after rebel forces took control of

Masiaka. At the time of her abduction she was stripped and raped by seven combatants. Taken to a rebel camp, she was repeatedly raped and was later forced to carry supplies, cook and cut wood. Girls and women in those areas of the country still controlled by rebel forces continue to face the threat of rape and abduction.

The United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) has a mandate to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence. UNAMSIL must adopt a more determined and active approach to protecting civilians, including girls and women at risk of abduction, rape and other forms of sexual violence. This should include extending, as far as possible, the area of deployment of UNAMSIL troops, particularly in those areas of Northern Province where abuses against civilians are continuing, and making every effort to defend civilians from attacks by rebel forces.

While some assistance is being provided in Freetown by non-governmental organizations to help victims of rape and sexual violence, much more needs to be done, especially outside Freetown where little or no help is available, says Amnesty International.

Under customary international law, rape committed by government officials or armed opposition groups during armed conflict constitutes torture. Rape by combatants in the conduct of armed conflict is now recognized as a war crime and, when committed on a systematic basis or large scale, it is a crime against humanity. As such, it is subject to universal jurisdiction.

In Sierra Leone the systematic way in which rape and sexual violence have been used, and committed so extensively with impunity, indicates a deliberate strategy to use rape and sexual violence against women and girls as a weapon of war and to instil terror.

The peace agreement of July 1999 provided a blanket amnesty for all acts including human rights abuses, perpetrated during the conflict. Amnesty International believes the amnesty in the peace agreement violates fundamental human rights principles by providing impunity to the perpetrators of gross human rights abuses and provides no deterrent against further abuses. The United Nations added a disclaimer to the peace agreement underlining the fact that the amnesty did not apply to crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

There can be no amnesty for the systematic rape and sexual violence against women and girls in Sierra Leone which amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, says Amnesty International. All those who are responsible must be brought to justice.

In its report, Amnesty International makes specific recommendations to the leaders of rebel forces, forces allied to the government, UNAMSIL and the wider international community. These recommendations include:

* The leaders of the RUF must take immediate measures to protect women and girls from rape and other forms of sexual violence, including by removing combatants suspected of these crimes from situations where they might occur, releasing all women and girls who are held captive and ensuring that no other abductions are carried out.

* The government of Sierra Leone and the leaders of forces allied to the government must instruct their forces not to commit rape and other forms of sexual violence, investigate all reports of rape and other forms of sexual violence and prosecute those alleged to have committed

those offences, and immediately remove from active service anyone suspected of committing rape or other forms of sexual violence.

** UNAMSIL must adopt a determined and active approach to protecting girls and women at risk of abduction, rape and sexual violence, ensure that peace-keeping troops are adequately trained in international human rights and humanitarian law, monitor and record the incidence of rape and other forms of sexual violence with a view to investigating and prosecuting those responsible, and help women and girls who have been forced to become sexual partners of rebel forces to leave demobilized combatants.*

** The international community must continue to condemn publicly the rape and sexual violence in Sierra Leone and apply sustained pressure on those in control of combatants to end these abuses, ensure that all cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence are fully investigated and that those responsible are brought to justice, and also ensure sustained and adequate assistance to the victims.*

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