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Liberia: Urgent human rights challenges for the UN Security Council

The United Nations (UN) Security Council should insist in the strongest possible terms that the signatories of Liberia's peace agreement fulfil their obligations under that agreement to respect international human rights and humanitarian law, Amnesty International said today ahead of a crucial meeting on Liberia.

Furthermore, "the Security Council should stress the urgency of deploying additional peace-keeping troops in Liberia in order to protect civilians and call on UN member states to contribute sufficient troops, with adequate logistical support, without further delay," the organization stressed.

On 22 December, the Security Council is scheduled to consider the UN Secretary-General's report on progress towards both the implementation of the peace agreement and Security Council Resolution 1509 (2003) which established the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL).

"The peace agreement, inauguration of a power-sharing government and deployment of UN peace-keeping troops should have augured well for the people of Liberia who have suffered appalling human rights abuses for so many years," Amnesty International said. "The Security Council must, however, act decisively to ensure that peace and an end to human rights abuses become a reality."

As recently as 15 December, the Security Council strongly condemned all attacks and acts of violence against civilians in conflict situations and updated a list of measures to shield women, children, refugees, internally displaced people and other civilians from the ravages of war.

"The important deliberations of the Security Council last week on the protection of civilians in armed conflict should be translated urgently into concrete action in Liberia," Amnesty International said.

An Amnesty International delegation which travelled to Liberia in November found that men, women and children in areas where UN peace-keeping troops had yet to deploy continued to be killed, raped, beaten, used as forced labour and driven from their homes.

In a report published last week Amnesty International shows that civilians continue to live in fear of increasingly undisciplined and desperate groups of armed fighters from all three parties to the conflict: the former government of Liberia, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). The volatility of the situation was highlighted last week by

rioting in Monrovia by armed former combatants in which at least 12 people were reported to have been killed.

"Those continuing to attack civilians are now represented by senior ministers in the National Transitional Government of Liberia, but they have been dilatory in their condemnation and instructions to commanders on the ground to end these abuses," Amnesty International said.

It is clear that the presence of UNMIL troops has deterred attacks on civilians. In areas where they have yet to deploy, however, such as in Bong and Nimba Counties, civilians remain without protection.

"The ability of UNMIL to implement its mandate to protect civilians is still seriously hampered as only about a third of its projected strength of 15,000 troops is currently on the ground," Amnesty International said.

Resolution 1509 (2003) provided for *"an adequate human rights presence, capacity and expertise within UNMIL to carry out human rights promotion, protection and monitoring activities"*. Continuing human rights abuses must be reported publicly to demonstrate to combatants that their actions are being closely watched and recorded and to strengthen the message that perpetrators will be brought to justice.

"The Security Council must request speedy establishment of a strong, fully resourced human rights component within UNMIL which will, as a matter of urgency, monitor the human rights situation, report publicly and undertake credible and robust activities to protect civilians."

As it considers the UN Secretary-General's report, the Security Council must also focus on ending impunity for crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law. The UN Secretary-General, the Security Council and the Acting High Commissioner for Human Rights have repeatedly said that those committing such crimes in Liberia will be held individually accountable. At the moment, however, there appears to be no sense of urgency to take measures towards ending impunity. The Chairman of the National Transitional Government has stated publicly that he favours a blanket amnesty which, according to the peace agreement, may be considered. Others argue that the political and security situation is still too fragile to pursue the perpetrators of human rights abuses and bring them to justice.

"In Resolution 1509, the Security Council stressed the need to bring those responsible for human rights violations and atrocities against the Liberian people to justice," Amnesty International said. "This now needs to be given some substance."

"The Security Council should not only explicitly reiterate that there can be no impunity for crimes under international law but also decide on concrete action to bring the perpetrators of these crimes to justice."

"We are calling on the Security Council to support the establishment, as soon as possible, of an international, independent investigation to establish accountability and recommend an appropriate court to try those alleged to be responsible," Amnesty International concluded.

For further information, please refer to *Liberia: "The goal is peace, to sleep without hearing gunshots, to send our children to school; that is what we want."* (AI Index: AFR 34/024/2003), published by Amnesty International on 11 December 2003.

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