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Sierra Leone: International community must stay involved after elections

"United Nations (UN) peace-keeping troops, Sierra Leonean security forces and international observers must ensure the protection of civilians throughout Sierra Leone from violence during the upcoming elections," a visiting Amnesty International said today in Sierra Leone.

On 14 May 2002, Sierra Leone will hold presidential and parliamentary elections for the first time since 1996. In a country devastated by over 10 years of internal armed conflict, transparent and peaceful elections would be a major step towards building a future based on respect for human rights and the rule of law.

The conflict between government forces and the armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF) was officially declared over in January 2002 and significant progress has been made in ending human rights abuses and providing protection and assistance to civilians.

"In the post-conflict period, the international community must sustain a long term high level of investment in Sierra Leone, in order to consolidate the progress already made," Amnesty International stressed. "In particular, increased attention and resources should be devoted to rebuilding and strengthening Sierra Leone's justice system."

Amnesty International delegates in Sierra Leone are carrying out an assessment of the needs of the justice system, including the police force, prosecution services, national courts and detention facilities. As a result of the protracted conflict, the judicial system has collapsed and institutions for the administration of justice, both civil and criminal, are barely functional. Throughout the country, the system lacks the necessary financial support, equipment and personnel with appropriate training in international criminal law, including judges, prosecutors and lawyers.

"Restoring confidence in the rule of law and the justice system throughout the country is crucial to achieving reconciliation and durable peace, ending human rights abuses and providing justice to the victims," the organization said.

The high incidence of sexual violence, widely acknowledged to have been perpetrated by all sides during the conflicts in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone has led to a high level of tolerance for such violence among the civilian population in the region. The improved human rights and security situation in recent months is an opportunity to address the culture of impunity surrounding the issue of

sexual violence against women and girls. Respect for the physical and mental integrity of women and girls must be the priority now.

In order to restore public confidence in the rule of law, the national judicial system must be effective, impartial and independent. Suspects should be tried in accordance with international standards of fairness, within a reasonable period of time and without recourse to the death penalty. Judges, lawyers and other legal personnel must be fully trained in juvenile justice, women's rights and gender sensitivity in order to deal with cases appropriately and ethically. Guarantees of protection must be provided for victims and potential witnesses who fear reprisal if alleged perpetrators were brought to justice.

There is also an imperative need to ensure that all human rights abuses, including those committed during the conflict, are investigated and accountability established. Accordingly, the Sierra Leonean government must immediately end the unlawful amnesty for war crimes and crimes against humanity provided in the 1999 Lomé peace agreement. Governments and the international community have consistently failed to address effectively the massive human rights abuses committed in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone over the past decade. The prolongation of armed conflict in the region is a dramatic illustration of the consequences of allowing impunity for human rights abuses to continue unchecked.

"Until the international community takes concrete action to address the human rights situation in Liberia, the situation in Sierra Leone will remain fragile."

Amnesty International has consistently campaigned for all those alleged to have committed human rights abuses to be brought to justice and for the prompt establishment of the Special Court for Sierra Leone. However, the Special Court will only prosecute a limited number of those who have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) also has an important role to play in revealing the truth about human rights abuses committed during the conflict, but it is not a judicial mechanism.

"Neither the Special Court nor the TRC can be a substitute for bringing to justice all alleged perpetrators of human rights abuses within the national judicial system", Amnesty International said.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>